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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Mitchell S. Jackson for the Master of Arts in Writing were presented July 3, 2002, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Mitchell S. Jackson for the Master of Arts in Writing presented July 3, 2002.

Title: Luminous Days

Luminous Days is a representation of my artistic vision, literary goals, and social influences. Artistically, I intend to create fiction that is aesthetically appealing. This aesthetic appeal includes the presence of a distinct narrative voice, realistically rendered settings, multidimensional characters, meticulous attention to diction, and sentence construction. The literary goal I hold in the highest regard is the creation of a body of work that demonstrates continued growth in my craft.

What I intend to render in my thesis is an accurate portrayal of the effects that drugs on the lives of my characters, and more specifically the relational strains of this disease on my characters. Luminous Days was not intended to be a mere exploration of drug addiction through the eyes of an addict, but an examination also, of the effects of people addicted to drug profits. Throughout this thesis I hope readers will glean insights into a culture this is at once marginalized, exploited, glorified, and criticized.

Artistically I hoped to create a story that is universally appealing by ascribing my characters problems and issues that are common to the human experience. I feel specificity in character depiction was a major component of that goal. I hoped to humanize my characters by ascribing them distinct desires, hopes, fears, and triumphs. In reading this thesis I want writers to realize one important thing: My work on this story is far from complete. This is a first draft of an almost completed manuscript. Read this work knowing that there are many drafts to come in terms of the evolution of my story.

LUMINOUS DAYS

by

MITCHELL S. JACKSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
WRITING

Portland State University
2002

For Lillie, Justice, and Rhonda

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One

Clouds full of precipitation filled the air with the smell of rain. A hidden moon, no light. Champ circles the Lexus around the block twice, dashboard green, orange, red lights illuminate like a city skyline at dusk. He stops at the curbside, Ivy street, where the pavement is dry. Recent rain is pooled against the curb, littered with a crushed plastic cup, two candy wrappers. Thin tires sit inches away from the curb; surround gleaming chrome rims; like polished silver spoons. The engine murmurs at low idle. Shadows from the telephone pole fall crosswise through the street, a soft vibration in the tailpipe.

He lowers his window, listens to the sounds of MLK, passing cars, a distant siren. The smell of urine seeps in with the wind; he raises his window. Across the street, lone illumination spills from a convenience store, the store's sign is barely lit, shattered in spots, burned out bulbs exposed.

Champ peers out of mirror tinted windows. Across the street, an empty parking lot guarded by bent metal poles, a long chain with a sign that reads: no trespassing, attached to it. There are trees along the sidewalk, bushes between them. The trees are barren leaves tangled, their trunks visible in the dirt, bursting through the concrete. A broken chainsaw lies in the grass, a single sock the rain drips from its tip hangs in a bush.

The Lexus sits in front of a house, behind a wooden trailer the trailer's contents bulging above its wall covered with a blue plastic tarp. A flight of steep

steps, no railings, leads to the house. The porch lights are off. The porch is covered with swelled lawn bags. The house is army green, trimmed in white; the trim is peeling around the windows. The grass is speckled with white flakes.

A van cruises past slow, a lone headlight illuminates the street; the engine grumbles, sounds prepared to submit at the next stop. Champ watches in his rearview mirror. The taillight s cover is shattered and replaced with red tape.

Cars pull from the convenience store parking lot onto the street. Champ s gaze lingers no more than a few seconds in one place, his stomach is tight, his eye twitches. He calls Bump from his cell, several rings: no answer. A second call: no answer. He considers pulling off, waiting until later. He s held still by the prospect of profit.

A knock at his window startles him, focuses his attention. He swallows, the breath lodges in his throat. An unidentified man appears at his driver side window. A second knock, Champ cracks his window for a closer look. The man is swallowed in loose clothes, stained and ripped. He s fragrant with the stench of the streets, wet dog, smoke, piss. His face is thin; the bones show through.

"Soup?" His lips are red, chapped; he s missing his front teeth.

No! He motions the man off with his hand.

You ain t got no soup brother? All I need is a dub?

A car turns down Ivy. The headlights cast Champ s car and the man the man standing near his car in a spotlight, then passes by.

"I ain t go no soup. Keep it movin !"

He retreats beyond the circle of light near the stairway, wanders down the street. Near the end of the block he disappears in the darkness.

The rain begins to fall, beads against the windshield. Champ lets it accumulate until he can't see; he starts the wipers. The wind exhales in short burst, lifts wrappers, blows an aluminum can down the sidewalk. He glances at his watch, 12:25; he's still a few minutes early. He re-checks his rearview. A car sits at a stop sign; it's centered in the street, police. Champ slumps in his seat, places the bag in the sleeve of his jacket. They're crawling down the street. He gets out of the car, starts up the steps of the house; he's careful not to look back; he walks each step with precise caution. When he reaches the front door, they've turned down MLK. He hurries off the porch.

He walks across to the store. The entrance needs repairs; rusty security bars protect the front windows. The glass is missing behind them, replaced by vandalized sheets of plywood. Champ pushes through the entrance; a bell rings.

The store clerk is two medium sized men combined; he's trapped behind the counter, behind bullet proof glass; he's hawking Champ like a suspected shoplifter. Champ walks to the coolers in the back of the store. He's contemplating how many store snacks the clerk consumes, free, each day. Champ's watching himself and the clerk in the security mirrors. He picks a fruit juice from the refrigerator, grabs a bag of chips on his way towards the counter.

He pulls a large handful of crumpled bills from his pocket, sorts through them for a five. His watch the bezel glitters with diamonds slides from his sleeve.

"Nice watch. Rolex?

"Yeah.

The clerk's hands look like a mechanic's, dirty nails; black palm lines, his fingers are sausage thick. Champ is glad his snacks are in containers. He stuffs the change in his pocket, walks out of the store.

Inside the Lexus, the heated seats warm the back sides of his thighs through his jeans. He opens his chips; starts the engine, pushes a button on his remote that rotates a mini tv from the woodgrained console. The picture plays muted.

The glare of headlights in his rearview mirror stings Champ's eyes. He removes the paper bag from his sleeve, slides the pistol aside, stuffs it in his underwear. It bulges in his groin like a pair of socks. The car idles; the lights click twice. Champ shifts to drive. The lights flick a second time, a honk follows. Champ steps out of the Lexus, edges towards the car, a late model Dodge Intrepid. The cool steel of the pistol he feels against his stomach; the barrel digs in his skin. When he's a few steps from the car, its passenger door swings open.

"Champ! A familiar voice shouts, Get in.

The familiarity eases escalating tension. Champ enters.

"Man, you had me shook up," Champ says, Police just rolled through here slow on me.

It s Hype, a childhood acquaintance Champ does business with on occasion.

"Spooked you?"

Champ s armed alarm beeps.

"You got it on you?" Rob asks, his voice a pitch to break glass.

"Yeah. Where we goin ? You got the ends?"

"No doubt but it's hot as a firecracker round here, we should do this somewhere else."

They pull off, drive a few blocks in silence, down MLK and turn down a dim side street. Rob stops the car on a street with one operational streetlight. It s the only light for two blocks in any direction. The semi darkness bothers Champ.

Damn you can t pick a spot with more light than this? You tryin to get over?.

Rob smiles exposes two gold capped teeth.

"Where's the Toyota?" Champ asks,

"Shop."

"Who s this?"

"Rental."

Hype clips short his replies.

Champ dismisses the brevity, scrutinizes Hype from the corner of his eye, feigns a confident expression. Hype wears a black Raiders t-shirt, black pants; a black leather coat. Their glances cross, both look away like two strangers caught staring at each other. The whites of Hype s eyes are glazed and red from weed

smoke; he smirks. Champ counts the years he's known Hype to calm his nerves. He counts seven; he's nervous again. He pulls the papersack from his underwear, hands it to Rob. He can hear his heart beat, feel a bead of sweat trickle down his side.

"All there, he says, Every gram.

A lull of silence. Hype opens the sack, opens the large ziplock bag inside the sack, sniffs inside. He rolls the edges down, shoves it under his seat, glares at Champ, who doesn't look back. Champ notices something awkward about his smile, menacing. They pull away from the curb, after a few turns they're heading East down Prescott, a narrow street, two story houses almost flush against the curb, the street canopied with trees, dark as a prison hole.

No music in the car, no talk quiet, the silence unnerving.

"You got the bread?"

More silence, deserted streets; sheets of rain slap the hood. The wipers are slow; the windshield is blurred. Hype hugs yellow lines. Down a side street, Champ's car ahead, they cross MLK, stop beside the Lexus. Hype hands Champ a sack from inside his coat; it feels light; Champ opens it, pulls out a stack of bills.

"All there bro, you ain't got to count it, Hype says.

"Yeah. I know. I trust you.

He lifts a few bills into view. They're small, the size of Monopoly money, thousand dollar bills copied on white paper. Champ reaches in the bottom of the bag; he pulls out a handful of tissue. His eyes spark with fear.

"Ah, Rob what's this shit?

The click of automatic door locks, the engine roars, the car bolts away from the curb, throws Champ back in his seat.

A man hidden in the backseat springs up, locks Champ's neck in a choke hold, gouches a gun-tip in his temple. There's blood where the gun breaks the skin. The pain knocks mutes screams in Champ's throat, steals his breath.

"Don't say one muthafuckin' thing!" The gunman yells. His voice is scratchy, irritated. He's tightening his grip, Champ tugging at his arm to loosen, his eyes bulging, tearing up.

They speed up backstreets, through stop signs, intersections, through the empty neighborhood, not a person lurching anywhere. Champ thinks to reach for his gun, then thinks against it. The car leaps over a hill, scrapes its underside when it lands, send sparks.

"Don't kill me, please, just take it!" His words are muffled in the gunman's sleeve.

"Shut the fuck up, Hype says, his voice a pitch to break glass. "Who the fuck you think you are? Ridin' around in her in your new car with all this damn jewelry, shittin' on everybody. This shit was bound to happen."

The gunman twists the gun-tip in Champ's temple and he clenches his eyes and fist. The car turns down a narrow alley, knocks over a garbage can, emerges from it; they speed towards Marine Drive. Down the road, around curves lined with boat shops, abandoned buildings, they speed, the tires screeching against the damp pavement. They head towards the river. Champ's feet are numb, his stomach

bubbles. He s thinking of his brother s now, Kymm, his mother. He hasn t seen her in months. Sweat beads his forehead.

"Please just let me go!"

"We ain't lettin you go. Shut the fuck up!" Champ s excitement is measured in his heightened pitch. The car skids around corners, hydroplaned through puddles big as small ponds, the water splashes over the car s roof like water from a broken fire hydrant.

"Take it. Just let me go!" Champ pleads, his voice cracking. He s thinking of words that can save his life. They won t come. He feels his pistol against his stomach, is to terrified to reach for it.

The gunman pounds his head with the gun handle, send waves of pain through his head. He s paralyzed. Overhead planes low in the sky; they near the airport. The car whips around corners. Champ realizes pleading is useless. He prays. He sees images, pictures of himself in a casket, a small bullet hole in his temple.

They turn off onto a grassy field. Mud flecks up on the windshield. The deafening sound of low planes, lighted runways miles off. No a car in sight.

"Let's do him, they gunman says. Champ clenches his eyes and asks GOD to forgive him for everything. His neck is stiff, his head throbs. He s trying to make sense of lunacy. He can t.

Hype spins the car out in the field.

"Get out, Hype says, his voice calm as funeral talk.

Champ sits motionless, paralyzed. He hears the door click unlocked, still doesn't move. His chest rises with exaggerated breath. The gunman releases his grip.

I said get da fuck out,

Champ opens his eyes, coughs, wheezes, then spits out mouthful of phlegm. He eases one foot in the grassy field. He doesn't look back, fears he'll be shot in the back. He slips, falls to one knee, struggles upright on weakened legs. He's lost his bearings; his heart pounds.

"Walk straight!"

Champ measures his steps like a drunk. A plane roars overhead; the tires peel off, spray him with mud like cloud burst. The sound of gunshots startle his heart. Champ lunges belly, face, in the muddy grass. The bullets whirl past, plunge in the mud inches away. He lays there face submerged in the grass.

Two

Six O'clock. The early morning sunrise hides behind a camouflage of scattered clouds. Rhonda eases from her bunk towards the window across the room. She nudges the frame open; a damp chill blows in on her skin. Vapor hovers inches away from the pavement; she looks down at the empty sidewalks, out across city. The concrete buildings of downtown, homes perched in the West Hills with roof peaks the needle the sky. She takes in a deep breath, holds it for a moment, sighs, repeats this several times, a procedure she's learned over the months in Depaul. She turns her back towards the window, scans the cubbyhole she has called home for the past six months.

Beside the bed an ancient nightstand, its wood etched and carved, its handle missing from the top drawer. A closet, no more than a hole cut in the drywall of the opposite wall, filled sparsely, one pair of shoes, three pairs of jeans, three shirts; there isn't room for much more. She washes every three days; they're all she owns but she's thankful. Her bunk donated to the program by the county jail is a combination of thick wires and steel springs. The mattress is thin as a summer blanket. Her radio sits on the floor near the bunk.

She turns back towards the window pulling in three more breaths. The air tickling her nose, the mist on her cheeks, she revels in it. She leaves it cracked, enough for the air to filter in without the cold. She strolls to the bed; the cool hardwood on her feet. She clicks on the reading lamp on her nightstand. She opens

the bible reads a passage, her morning ritual now. There s a strength and calm her reading provides. She knows she s closer to God than she s ever been. She hopes it s enough to see her through the tribulations that lie ahead, when she leaves. She picks her notepad from the floor, a pen, and begins to write.

Here you go again. This is getting so familiar. But yeah it's different this time. You're stronger. You have to be. You feel stronger, fortified and for the first time you're leaving with no skeletons in your closet. Everything you've done, all you can remember is out on the table now. And you know that's a first. You told them about your mom, the boys, the good for nothing ass men you've had, and lord knows you've had your share of them. All your triggers, as they call them here, are taken care of right? They gotta be, cause you damn sure can't keep going through this. You can't keep saying it's the last time, and letting it be the next to last time, over and over again. You can't keep smoking with the one good lung you have left. You want to live. You have to live. You've got two boys to raise, and Champ. He needs to see his mama clean. You ain't been nothing but a damn dope pheïn since he was ten, ten years old, half his life. You can't let it happen to them. The only goal you've ever had in your life is being a good mother and you damn sure ain't done that. But now's the chance. Now is your time to stoping saying and start doing cause the boy aren't getting any younger and you've already messed off one kids life. You've got it together, I know you do.

She lays down her pad, lays the pencil down across it, leans back in her bunk, arms folded over her eyes. She thinks back to her childhood days in

Alabama attending Catholic schools, church on Saturdays, twice Sundays. Her parents forced her and three brothers to attend Bible study, join the choir.

A knock startles Rhonda. A staff woman enters the room.

Breakfast, she yells, then turns and walks out without waiting for an answer. Rhonda lies still.

She sits up, slips on her robe and houseshoes, strolls down the hall to Monica's room. The door is flung open. Monica sits on her bunk, against a wall, knees raised to chest, a Bible balancing between them.

Rhonda knocks and waits for her to look up.

Come on in girl, Monica says. She lies her Bible beside her and stands.

They hug.

How you feeling this morning? Monica asks.

Fine. Got up early and got some fresh air, a little bit of the word in.

Yes. You're doing right. Just keep standing on the word girl. They clutch each other like it's their last embrace. You know it ain't going to be easy, but I got faith in you.

Monica had entered Depaul a month earlier than Rhonda. They immediately struck up a friendship. Each had children, boys Rhonda three, two young boys and Champ. Monica's sons, both young, were ages nine and ten when she entered. Both Rhonda and she were both Southern raised and Baptist and had a similar drug of choice crack.

Let s go down for breakfast, Rhonda says. She pulls away. They walk to the cafeteria, a small room enclosed by stark white walls like hospitals, gray tile, stainless steel tables and counters. The program staff serve small portions no seconds ever. They tout all fifty patients are given equal nourishment, but rather it s equal opportunity to maintain their frail addicted figures.

The morning are conversations low, whispers just above the sound of silverware on the steel tables, lips smack.

Back in her room Rhonda gazes out over the city, listens to the steady patter of rain against the concrete. She smiles silently, picturing the faces of her three sons, Champ, Chris, Dupree. She hasn t seen them in months. She s anxious, anxious and fearful. They know nothing of her transformation, they only know recent heartaches, the pain.

Champ she misses most. They were best friends, only nineteen years apart. But addiction, long ago, had wedged between their friendship, addiction, time, disappointment, successively until no one seemed to care any more not he about her, and not her about herself. The relapses occurred without warning, the time between them shrinking, until they seemed like one long binge with short rests. She d managed a year clean, the year she d spent in jail.

Thelma, a nurse peeks through the door crack, slips in unnoticed. She eases behind Rhonda, places a hand on her shoulder. How you feeling? she asks. Her voice is soothing, sincere.

Fine.

You've got some paper work to fill out later so we can get your housing and other stuff taken care of.

Rhonda holds back tears. She thinks of the fight questions her strength. She's spent six months free of temptations, burdens. A roof over her head, where her next meal is coming from, money; they haven't been worries. She's had no reason to look over her shoulder because she'd stolen someone's money or dope. She hasn't seen the inside of a holding tank, jail cell, the back seat of a police car.

Today that's all gone now.

In a few hours temptation returns.

You'll be O.K., Thelma says. You're a strong girl, you got the Lord, a solid foundation. You've got me, and if you ever need me all you have to do is call or just come, I'm here.

Rhonda wipes tears, takes in a long breath her shoulders raised, nostrils flared she sighs. She's drawing from Thelma's strength. She believes her; she sees the difference; she feels it.

Depaul she entered by her own volition, which made it different than her other attempts at rehab, the forced ones. Courts, judges, probation officers, family, couldn't compel sobriety. It was a decision all her own, one she'd finally made.

The experience at Depaul was entirely different. She spoke up during daily group, excised painful memories hoarded for years, the death of her mother, time in orphanages, the forced split from her brothers. She has revealed her secrets, exposed her weakness, and asked for help.

Rhonda affirms today will be different. She's not the weary dope fiend who staggered in the doors pencil thin and three days starved. Today she's improved, empowered, repaired, invigorated. Her weight is back, or most of it, her esteem. She's ready she thinks, won't let the doubt creep in. Across the room to the bunk she walks, kicks off her shoes.

Donna sits at her desk, papers strewn about, loose documents scattered across the floor. She glances at her cluttered walls, framed certificates, awards, and pictures of survivors decorate the crumbling plaster. She reclines in her single extravagance, a thick cushioned leather office chair. Silent she reaffirms her purpose to produce more survivors a ritual the past ten years. The survivors validate her life. She endures meager pay, weekly budget cuts because she knows the pain of gradual extinction all too well. She pulls Rhonda's file from a stack of manila folders, sifts through Rhonda's, evaluations, recommendations, exit papers, buzzes staff to retrieve her.

Minutes later, Rhonda pushes through her office door her shoulders tense up and stiff from nerves.

Come on in. Have a seat, Donna says.

Rhonda sits in a metal fold-up chair, rusted around the legs, creaking from her weight.

I'm just finishing up the rest of your paper work.

Rhonda slumps. She taps her shoes on the hardwood floor.

It looks like you ll be staying in the Piedmonts.

Silence.

Rhonda is unable to mask her disappointment.

I know it s kind of like sending you off to the wolves, but you ve got the tools to survive there. You ve got the tools to survive anywhere.

They both let the fact that the Piedmonts are drug infested go unspoken.

Why the Piedmonts? Rhonda s voice cracks.

Housing in this city is atrocious. Nobody cares about providing low income housing to anyone. It s just how it is. Don t you worry, just as soon as I can get you out of there I will. Donna slaps the exit papers down near Rhonda.

Sign where I marked the red X s.

Rhonda scribbles her name. She doesn t read one line. She s feeling sorry for herself; her hands are trembling.

You alright? Donna says studying Rhonda s trembling hands.

No answer.

Rhonda finishes the papers closes up the manilla folder. Donna hands her a bus pass, a hundred dollars in twenties, walks around the desk and hugs Rhonda so tight she traps her arms by her sides.

Rhonda. She says leaning back, studying her expression, look at that wall. Those are survivors. That s where you ll be. I know it.

Rhonda s tears stream down; her eye twitches.

Go on and get the rest of your things ready. They ll be someone waiting for you at the apartments.

Rhonda backs away when Donna lets go, wipes her tears. Thank you for everything Donna. She leaves the room.

Downtown one side is the picture of affluence. A landscape of high rise buildings, remodeled landmarks. Monumental structures created from marble, brick, glass, stretch high in the clouds. Below executives stroll the sidewalks in navy business suits, red ties, expensive brief cases. Street corners lined with Espresso shops, trendy boutiques.

In Old Town, blocks away. battered storefronts, tiny antiques stores squeezed between vacant buildings some condemned, most in need of it. On every block addicts, suspicious teens, police with cars pulled aside searching. The addicts wander aimlessly, liquor bottles in hand, donation cans, out of sight but on person, pipes, syringes. Pawn shops near by, a gay bar.

In OldTown Rhonda waits, under a covered bus stop, the smell of piss seeping up. A duffel bag weights her shoulder, tilts her onesided. Inside the bag: everything she owns. She peers through the bus stop s graffitied windows. The rattle of nearing city bus; then one pulls at her stop.

Rhonda boards, flashes her bus pass at the driver, takes a seat in the back of the bus. The stench of stale liquor and seldom-bathed passengers assuage the bus cabin. The bus roars off; downtown, the city skyline, fade in the distance.

The bus passengers are sparse, the ride quiet. An elderly woman sits at the front of the bus. A young boy sits across from Rhonda, rainbow colorful; green, purple, and orange spiked hair. His sleeveless T-shirt exposes a sleeve of tattoos on his arm. His shirt is ripped across the chest, cutoff shorts frayed along the hem. A silver chain hangs from his belt loop to floor. He stares at Rhonda. His eyes are painted with black circles, his fingernails neon pink.

Rhonda tries not to stare, instead focuses her attention outside. Her window cracked, the smell of gas leaks in.

The boy taps a song on skateboard across his lap, signals a stop a few blocks later, skates down the street into traffic.

After two stops, a familiar face boards Michael. He searches his pockets for change near the bus's front door, before the driver waves him past.

Long time no see girl. What you been up to? Michael asks animated. He walks down the aisle, chooses the seat next to Rhonda. His clothes are filthy; his shoes have no laces. He smells like a burning cigarette.

Fine

Looking good too, haven't seen you in awhile. He smiles.

Cause I been getting myself together, been at Depaul.

Michael looks skeptical. Yeah, I did the Depaul thing a few years ago. Stayed clean for a few months too. He wears his drug problem like a badge. Anyway. I got a little money in my pocket and since you a friend and fresh out, and done beamed me up many a time, I got ya first sixteenth. Game?

No! She says. I m clean Michael and stayin that way.

Oh! I m sorry baby I just thought

I know what you thought. It s different now, no more of the same old stuff for me.

Sounds like you forreal. Michael says, the blithe crushed out of his voice.

My bad. I just thought oh I guess it don t matter. I m proud of you.

She turns away, looks outside the window.

Michael exits one stop later, trudges slow across traffic, head lowered.

A smile breaks on Rhonda s face. One for the first hurdle passed. Still she knows there s more to come, but for now satisfaction.

She exits a few blocks from the Piedmonts. The dull scenery, not much, if anything, has changed. Abandoned cars atop bricks curbside or rolled onto front lawns, tires missing, doors, hoods, engines. In the street, broken glass, candy wrappers, smashed milk cartons, discarded prescription bottles.

She ambles the sidewalk, slumped from the weight of the duffel bag, pushes a rusted grocery basket off the sidewalk into a lawn. It overturns.

A sign hangs from the front bars of the gated apartment complex that reads: *No drugs here*. Rhonda buzzes the intercom, kicks a Old English forty-ounce bottle into the gate. It rolls back off the curb.

Hello. A static voice answers over the receiver

My name is Rhonda. I m from Depaul. Her voice is low and shaky.

Excuse me mam, could you speak up? I m having a hard time hearing you.

I I said my name is Rhonda. I I m just released from Depaul.

Still can t hear you, the woman says. She exhales loud over the speaker.

Just a minute. I ll be right out.

Rhonda rests the duffel bag over her ankles, looks down the street. There s a young boy, high school aged, leaned against a street sign. He s wearing a blue baseball cap; his jeans are belted around his thighs. He wears a Kansas City Royals parka jacket, giant KC letters stitched on the coat. The boy whistles at a near-by pedestrian, waits for them to approach.

Rhonda turns her head away from the transaction, turns back. Her curiosity winning over her resolve. She eyes the exchange, feels the muscles in her stomach tighten.

Damn shame, they don t even try to hide it no more?

The voice startles Rhonda.

You the must be?

Rhonda

Yes, Rhonda. We ve got to do something bout that damn intercom. I couldn t hear a word you said. I m Teresa. The woman extends her hand clasps Rhonda in a firm shake, palms warm and sweaty. I m the resident manager slash counselor here. Come on I ll take you to my office, we can get your intake paperwork filled out. I can show you all the amenities. Teresa starts to laugh.

They stroll along the narrow pathway that winds through the apartments. Unkempt flowerbeds piled with tiny mountains of trash. Farther down the path, a

frail woman stands in her patio door smoking a cigarette, her hands trembling, jerking the cigarette smoked down to the butt away from her mouth. She watches them pass without the slightest hint of apprehension.

The apartments are divided in units of four, positioned on either side of the path. Battered brown paint peels from the walls. Every other apartment window is cracked, boarded, the boards scribbled with graffiti. Rhonda sees a former Depaul patient sweeping trash front welcome mat. The pathway juts around a corner towards the manager's office.

Pretty ugly, Teresa says walking a few steps in front of Rhonda, but it's a place to lay your head.

I guess. Is the gate always closed?

Twenty-four hours a day, but that doesn't stop them little thugs from getting they stuff in here.

Rhonda cringes.

I know it's not the best place for you to be right now. What did you say your name was again?

Rhonda

Yes, Rhonda sorry I got so much stuff on my mind. She fishes keys out of her pocket, Anyway I tell everyone that comes from Depaul the same thing, if you make it here, you can make it anywhere, and besides, it's better than being on the streets

They reach the office, the size of a cubbyhole, an ancient typewriter centered on metal desk. A metal fold up chair behind it.

Rhonda fills out the paper work.

Teresa escorts her to the apartment.

Three

He s the color of bleached wood, stands neck high to scrubs. Straight white teeth, his hair falls mid-back unbraided but he s seldom seen without cornrows, freshly parted, wrapped in bandanas. His skin is baby smooth, a transparent mustache the only trace of facial hair. His eyes are the color of wheat, darker when he s angry. Small hands, small, feet. He belts his baggy jeans belted low, bunched over his icy white Nikes.

Bump snatches his coat from a living room armchair, ignores the vibrating pager, his ringing cellphone. Annoyed, he pulls the pager from his hip and throws it against the wall, shatters it into tiny pieces. He storms in his bedroom, inside his closet, and pulls a heavy shoebox from the shelf, He snatches the lid off, raises a chrome pistol in full view. He slams in a full clip, drops the second clip in his pocket, bolts out the door.

He takes two drags from his blunt on the drive to the gambling shack, thinking between inhales, his nerves won t calm, his temper. He pulls screeching tires into the shack s parking lot, pounds the door. No answer. He pounds again. Security answers, he s take up all the space in the door. His belly pushes out like a pregnant woman. Bump scoots past, security s towering presence doesn t bother him.

"What you want, little man? Didn't you just get licked?"

"They still down there?"

"Yeah. What you do go home crack your piggy bank?"

Bump conceals his agitation, thinks of pulling his pistol, then thinks better of it.

The house smells of garbage, the floors neither carpet or hardwood, but somewhere in between and heavily scarred. Wallpaper fell from the walls snatching chunks of lath and plaster. A stool is the only identifiable piece of furniture.

Bump eases his excitement, eases down the stairwell. A black quilt envelops the narrow pathway as he cautiously measured the distance and sturdiness of each step. A light glints from the crack under the quilt. He misses the last step stumbles through the quilt interrupting a Spades game at a nearby table.

"Hey, little ole' bright skin nigga you quit makin so much damn noise? We got big money over here"

The man's smile reveals a full set of gold teeth; there are chuckles around the table a look that pushes Bump to the brink of his patience. Bump glares, storms silent around the corner into the dice room.

The lights in the fixture are removed, the bulbs exposed. The room swims in dull light. A collage of signatures on the walls, trash piled in corners. Six gamblers in the room, four of them circled on one knee around the dice. Bump stands for a moment, unrecognized, in the threshold of the door, considers his options.

"Bet I hit for the bill, a man yells. He squats, throws a hundred-dollar bill in the circle.

"Bet it.

The dice tumble inside the huddle. The gamblers chatter. Bump's chest swells. His shoulders rise, eyes are dark; his pupils are the color of mud.

"Bet I hit little Joe?" Stacy screams. He's kneeling in the circle. His red baseball hat is turned backwards; a do-rag lies on the collar of his shirt.

"Bet you don't leave out of here with my money!"

All eyes turn to the doorway. Bump stands without a word. He knows the power of silence, its intimidation. Conversations cease. Bump edges close to Stacy. Stacy's eyes are opened wide, pupils, iris, all visible.

"Break bread."

"Yo Bump you trippin'. I licked you."

"Lick my nuts. You ain't give me a chance to get my money back.

Bump stands an arm's length away.

"Bet it back right now?"

"Too late.

Bump pulls out his pistol. Uneasy silence undercut by the sound of heavy breathing. One of the men standing moves toward the door.

"Ain't nobody leavin' this muthafucka 'til I get my bread back period. Have a seat scary ass nigga."

Bump cocks the gun, points it at Stacy's head. He can sense the fear in him. He can taste it; he can see it hiding boiling up behind his eyes.

"Break bread."

"C mon on bro?"

"Drop it!"

Tracy rummages his pockets, pulls out a wad of crumpled bills, counts out eleven hundred dollars, separates it, hands it up to Bump. He can't stop his hands from trembling.

Bump snatches the bills, stuffs them in his pocket.

"Interest."

C mon bro. I gave you back everything I took plus another hundred.

Interest. What you think I'm playin'? Bump lowers the pistol and shoots through Tracy's shoulder. For a split second after the shot the room is silent, motionless. Tracy falls back, screams, grabs his shoulder. There's a small hole in his jacket where the bullet pierced. Bump stuffs the money in his pocket, his green eyes stormed brown.

"None of you other mutafuckas gone' take nothin' from me ever!"

Four

Kymm glosses her lips, pulls her hair into a ponytail, examines herself one final time before leaving. In the living room, she grabs her purse before heading out.

She drives through traffic sun beating down through the sunroof and stops for gas. Awaiting the attendant she feels the persistent stare focused on her.

Fill it up, she says, then eases out the car. Her legs are long and smooth to match a smooth saunter. She moves toward the door.

Hey beautiful! The voice calls from inside a Mercedes. Can you stop and holla at a fella?

Kymm walks past, into the store without a word, without a look in his direction. Inside she buys a bottled water, pays for her fill up. When she exits, he is sitting on the hood of his car, flashing a yellow stained smile.

Hey baby! I'm tryin' to holla at you. What's your name beautiful?

Kymm, she says. pauses a moment, twist the top off her bottled water.

Kymm you sure are fine. You think a brotha could take you out sometime?

I got a man. She sips water exaggerated.

I ain't asked bout no man baby that's not my business. I wanna know if a brotha can take you out? Movie, nice dinner, whatever you wanna do the money ain't a thang with me, he says, rubbing his chin. The sun sparkles against his

diamond watch; he leaves it in plain view. He s handsome, hair mustache and beard trimmed neat, casually dressed.

I got a man, she says, And if I want to go out for dinner and a movie he ll take me.

There s a stunned expression on his face, his mouth agape; his eyes are trapped open. He steps off his hood, enters the car, and peels out the lot.

Kymm navigates through traffic unhurried; with almost an hour before her appointment. She opts for the steady moan of mid-morning traffic over her CD s. She pulls into the parking lot, circles a few times, finds a close parking spot open. She slides through the clinic doors glancing at her watch, still ten minutes to spare. Ahead of her, waits an enormous pregnant woman in line. Kymm imagines what the woman must be experiencing, stomach swelled, full cheeks, her feet bursting out of tennis shoes, a sight that offers no comfort. Kymm signs her name on a list and waits in the lobby.

The woman waddles toward her seat, a toddler attached to her thick ankles. She lowers her wide hips in the seat. The whole ordeal takes a full fifteen seconds.

Kymm ponders her circumstances; her reluctance towards motherhood, the fear of growing fat, saddled with a child she s not ready for. She busies her attention with a magazine. After a few minutes a nurse calls her name. Kymm follows her to an examining room. They stop at a scale, record her weight in her charts.

One hundred and twenty eight pounds, the nurse says loud enoght for it to be an announcement.

There's envy in the nurse's voice, but Kymm's more concerned with the extra eight pounds she's gained. The nurse hands Kymm a cup, shows her to the bathroom. Inside, Kymm pees, places her cup in a recessed opening above the toilet. When she exits, the nurse escorts her to an examining room, inside measures her vitals.

Dr. Bartley will be right with you. The nurse's voice is breathy, like every word hurts. She's near wide as a doorway.

Kymm pulls a pamphlet from the wall and glances over the words. She's reading about the first signs of pregnancy. After a few sentences she slams the pamphlet down beside her and walks to the mirror. The extra pounds are lodged in her face and lower stomach. Disgusted, she returns to the examining table.

Minutes later, Doctor Bartley enters. Silver hair, clean-shaven; he wears brown loafers.

Hey Kymm how are you doing today? He flashes the same assured smile he's had for years, the smile of a man confident of his place in life, his finances. He holds a white carbon slip in his hand.

I see you've been looking over the pregnancy pamphlets. He looks at the pamphlet lying beside Kymm, picks up her file from the counter top, glances it over.

Yes. Her voice is weak. She avoids his eyes.

How is that boyfriend of yours behaving? You need me to give him a good talkin' to, tell him he'd better be treating my favorite patient right or else old Dr.

Bartley is gonna have to come looking for him with his hunting rifle.

He s good,

Still in school?

Yes.

Good. When does he graduate?

June. Why all the questions

Cause baby s need daddy s with jobs these days. He waits for a moment.

Kymm s breath stops. Outside, the sound of nurses in the hallway leak in through a cracked door.

Her eyes tear up Pregnant? She s in disbelief. She focuses her eyes on the doctor s hands; they re thick and wrinkled, green veins under his skin like train tracks.

Yes your test came back positive. He glances over the charts, Have you thought about your plans? He asks. If you need some help telling him I ll be glad to help or maybe have one of the nurses help you. He walks by the mirror, pulls out a few tissues, hands them to Kymm.

Her mind clutters up with questions. What? No I don t know what. I haven t even thought about it. She dabs her tears. Doctor Bartley s smile is disintegrated.

I understand this is kind of overwhelming for you right now, but you have a lot of options available to you. Don t worry about leaving. You can stay in here as long as you need to get yourself together, he says, When you re finished you can make a follow-up appointment with Betty. He walks out.

Kymm takes a few minutes to calm herself, walks to the mirror, dabs smeared mascara with Kleenex.

Five

Thirty minutes, his frustration escalates; Champ circles the parking lot a full thirty minutes in search of a vacant parking spot. He spots a van backing out of a space at the far end of the lot, swoops in right behind it. He slides his glass case in his pocket, grabs his backpack from the passenger seat.

He darts through buildings Smith, Kramer, Hosford between students, everyone unhurried, it seems, but him. He looks at his watch; fifteen minutes past eleven. He s fifteen minutes late to class again.

Champ stops by the lecture hall entrance, stooped over, winded. He takes in a few deep breaths for composure. The loud clang of the hall door douses hopes of a quiet entrance. Students look up from their papers. He searches for an empty seat; there are few in the auditorium all in middle of the hall. He ll have to climb over atleast 10 students to reach the nearest opening. Snickers as he squeezes past. Champ whispers apologies.

Professor Harrison stops, mid sentence, his lecture. He admonishes Champ with a stern glare. Champ tries not to look up, removes his books and notepad from his backpack. He busies himself with note taking. The room is dim; transparencies loom large on a screen. He puts on his glasses.

Mr. Harrison asks a question from the assigned reading. An absence of raised hands and its apparent that no one in the class has read. Champ seizes the

moment to make amends for his tardiness. He raises his hand, the lone raised hand in the entire classroom.

Yes, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Harrison says. His skeptical baritone voice bounces off the vaulted ceilings, concrete walls. Could you please enlighten your classmates? It seems many of them have failed to properly prepare for this lecture.

Champ proceeds to reel off an answer so insightful, eloquent, that he momentarily amazes himself. When he finishes; several classmates look as though they might break out in applause.

Thank you Mr. Jackson I appreciate a student who prepares, he pauses for emphasis, even if they do come fifteen minutes late to class. The snickers return. Mr. Harrison stands stone-faced in front of the screen the projector, projecting the words across his face.

Apparently, a vast majority of the class hasn't acquainted themselves with the assigned materials; perhaps I should adjourn the class so that task can be accomplished. He says straightening his bowtie.

A chorus of closing books and rustling book bags echoes through the lecture hall. Most of the class empty into the hallway like they've heard a fire bell. Mr. Harrison converses on stage with a small circle of students. He pushes the rim of his thick bifocals onto the bridge of his nose. A perfectly rounded 1960s afro cements his head. Champ loads his backpack, slowly walks down the aisle towards the exits.

Mr. Jackson I would like to speak with you for a moment if you have the time?

Champ edges his way toward the stage. He's thinking of an excuse for his tardiness; can't think fast enough.

On the stage an attractive Caucasian girl speaks with Professor Harrison. Champ stands behind him, his skin dark as a shadow in the dim auditorium. The girl has one of those unworried smiles, the smile of a student whose parents pay for college completely. Champ isn't sure if she's smiling at him or the professor.

When they finish, she saunters past and smiles again. It's a full smile; her teeth like photos in a dentist office. She leaves a scent like fresh fruit.

Hi Champ. She whips her shoulder length hair behind her shoulder, keep walking, but turns and looks back at Champ before leaving the hall.

Champ eyes her the entire way, makes a mental note to find her next class.

Mr. Harrison ignores the exchange or pretends to, well, shuffles papers in his ancient brown brief case. He slams it shut.

I could not help but notice your tardiness this afternoon, even after our latest discussion.

I know sir, I was

Oh it is not important. At least you did come to class prepared, which is more than I can say for the rest of your classmates. He straightens his bow tie again, like he's overly preoccupied with its angle. I invited you stay after because I wanted to speak with you about your plans.

What plans? Champ leans against the edge of the lecture podium.

Plans following graduation. You are very close to completing your undergraduate studies. Am I correct in that assumption?

Yeah.

Have you begun to think about your plans beyond that day? Mr. Harrison slips on a suit jacket, brown polyester, gold buttons. He waits for fashions to reemerge; he wears ancient styles in between. It s as if he s been frozen in a fashion time capsule, released in the mid-nineties.

No. Not really. His answer is half-truth. He s thought about *not* returning to school.

Mr. Jackson I have been teaching a long time and you are one of the most gifted students that I have had the privilege of instructing. The assessment flatters Champ, but he conceals hid response.

I think you should strongly consider graduate school,

Champ s cell phone rings. He welcomes the interruption.

Holla, he answers, What you talkin bout? Twenty-eight fifty. I ll hit you when I get ready, he says. He slides the phone back in his pocket.

Thanks, but I think these are my last days as a student. The slang is absent from his voice; he s returned to the role of student. It s taking everything in me just to get this first piece of paper.

Professor Harrison erases the remaining lecture notes from the board, grabs his briefcase off the table.

I understand your feelings, I felt the same way when I was in your position, but this is an excellent opportunity for you, and I am sure you will benefit. No matter what you choose, I believe you will do exceptionally well.

They head for the exit. Mr. Harrison follows closely in the rear.

Mr. Jackson do you have time enough to grab a bite to eat?

Professor Harrison has ended class an hour early. There s only one correct answer.

That s cool.

Would you like to go to Smith Hall? I will pay for the meal.

They walk crowded hallways. Champ busies himself watching the expressions of passerby. He s taking in the scenery with a novel degree of observation. A woman passes, thin blouse, dark denim jeans frayed at the cuff, scarred running shoes. Her hair is tangled curls pulled into a loose bun. She wears no make-up; her face is the color of white bread. When she passes, she leaves the pungent odor of old furniture and cigarette smoke.

They pass a group of three Asian girls. Champ flashes a flirtatious smile, most his smiles at woman are flirtatious. They re dressed in uncoordinated designer fashions purses, shoes, skirts, shirts. One wears glasses. They have the money to buy the fashions not the fashion sense to match them.

Champ is grateful for Kymms fashion sense. He buys: Gucci, Chanel, Versace she wears them like runway models. Their conversation is scattered with giggles. Laughs un-anchored with worries.

Professor Harrison walks a few steps ahead. Champ wonders he's thinking. His gait is a near jog like his destination is a finishline somewhere close. The cafeteria is half full; they find a seat near a muraled wall. Around them the sound of rattled dishes, clanging silverware.

Would you like tacos?

Champ nods. Professor Harrison walks towards the small Taco Bell store inside the food court. His afro flecked with gray is smashed down in the back. His polyester slacks are wrinkled in the knee.

Adjacent from their table is the area where the Middle Eastern students sit. They laugh and tease, but there's something different in their laughs, like they're mocking, chastising. It's the laugh of old money, generations of wealth. They look down on poverty, despise the recent rich self admittedly envious. They drive late model Mercedes, and luxury SUV's. He's seen at least two of them driving Ferraris. They only speak among themselves, like speaking to outsiders will weaken their edge. The men date white women.

Professor Harrison returns with four tacos, two pops. He wastes no time wading into conversation.

Mr. Jackson I want to tell you a little bit about myself.

Champ's attention wanders. He sips from his pop.

I told the class that I grew up in the south and that is true. I was raised during a time when things were not so prosperous for African Americans. I lived during a time when even the word African American did not yet exist in the

American vocabulary. But that is only partial reason for the struggles of my childhood. Professor Harrison pushes his glasses up on his nose. He takes a sip of his pop. My mother was a prostitute and drug addict. My father went to prison before I was able to develop any memory of him. He pauses again, studies Champs eyes.

Champ s mind wanders, allows affords him only fragments of the lecture.

I raised my siblings, a sister younger by two years and a brother my junior by four years.

Chaps wandering mind is focusing now. Professor Harrison s pauses deter interruptions.

We lived with a grandmother who was extremely old at the time, and I had to begin working at the age of 12 to help support my family. There s a slight crack in Professor Harrison s voice, but no trace of a tear.

I lost my sister to a drug addiction when I was in high school. My brother was sentenced to a life sentence for killing a white teen who called him a nigger. Visible tears in Professor Harrison s eyes now. He takes another drink of pop.

This is the first time Champ has seen any emotion from him. He didn t think he was capable. Champ tunes out all disruptions; listens to every word like it s Bible.

There was a time after the sentencing of my brother when I was very unsure about the direction of my life a time when I did not have direction. He dabs his eye with the napkin from the Tacos. But, I managed to make it through high school, college, and eventually gradate school. He adjust his glasses, clears his

throat. Mr. Jackson, I did not make it through my situation being an angel, but at the same time I came to the conclusion that if I wanted to survive and become a successful and well respected member of society I had to beat the white man at his own game. I had to know everything that he knew. I had to be educated but education does not stop after four years. He pauses. Do you understand my point?

Champ is silent for a moment, then says: I think.

I am not aware of your situation nor am I attempting to inquire into your personal life, but very honestly, I see remnants of myself in you. Maybe I am incorrect and you have a right to tell me I am wrong, by all means, but I have a sense in many ways we are alike.

Champ nods his head in subtle agreement. He is not sure how Professor Harrison touches so close to the truth. He judges over the years he has mastered the ability to read his students. He sees no use in deception.

You are blessed with a gift an opportunity to venture beyond many of your peers, to set a standard of academic achievement and social excellence that you can be proud of, that your younger siblings if you have them can be proud of, your parents. He pauses. Neither of them has eaten a bit of their tacos. Under ordinary circumstances I would not speak on this personal of a level with one of my students, but I believed if I did not speak with you, I would be doing you a grave injustice. I do not view this as a compromise of my professional ethics. I would like you to

know that I recognize your potential and I am encouraging you to fulfill that potential Mr. Jackson. He glances at his watch, straightens his bow tie.

Champ's cell phone rings. He silences it in his pocket without looking at it.

Mr. Jackson I will not take up any more of your time, but please do consider my advice. And if you ever need a someone to talk with do not hesitate. He stands, he slides on suit jacket. The buttons are pulling apart, succumbing to the pressure of his stomach. He extends his hand for a handshake. Bare wrists are exposed; they creep out of his short sleeves.

Thank you, Champ says. He can't think of any more to say. He watches Professor Harrison disappear through the exit doors, into the park blocks.

He sips his pop alone at the table. He's piecing together fragments of the conversation, considering motives. He feels transparent. Is he that easy to read? He believes he's more complicated. Advice lingers above him, at head level, like smoke from a recently deceased campfire. He's thinking now, more directly, about his future. Graduate school is creeping in his thoughts. He's devising a plan. Champ's appetite has vanished. He pushes away his cold tacos, drinks the last sips of soda. He dumps his trash, walks towards the exits.

Light hallway traffic. Champ strolls in the direction of his next class. He's trying to postpone his thoughts, empty those that challenge his resolve. He can't. He's carrying them.

The summation of his most lucrative talent: he cooks good dope. He can recite gram increments like multiplication tables. He's slick carries backpacks to

school, on occasion, with kilos of cocaine. Classmates prepare for graduation with the uncertainty of career and graduate schools choices looming Champ prepares with the threat of violence, prison, death.

He checks his watch passing by the auditorium. He stops in, enters through heavy steel doors, finds emptiness. He walks down the aisle towards the stage, finds a seat a few rows back. In the hallway, the sound of footsteps, passing conversations, doors closing. Soon there s silence. He drifts into a daydream, thinks of graduation.

June heat swelters inside. The air is thick. The seats are filled, the balcony, the aisles. On stage, a podium, seats filling with faculty, speakers. The band plays, a procession of students, applause, camera flashes like small explosions. Champ in the procession, his cap is loose on his head, honors tassels over his gown. Beneath the gown, a tailored Gucci suit, five buttoned belt, shirt, tie, and shoes. He wears the cost of tuition, but doesn t pay it. He s on scholarship and financial aid. The seats are filled. He can t suppress his smile.

Camera flashes like tiny explosions in the audience, screams, whistles, claps. Champ searches for his family, his section. He listens for the sound of a familiar voice. It comes in the form of his mother, Rhonda. She s leaning over a rail, waving her hands for attention. Her smile is pure and white; she looks clean. The rest of the family Eliza Bubba, Chris, Dupree, aunts, uncles, cousins they take up two rows. He hasn t seen many of them in years. They scream like they re the only people present, revel in the attention. Champ poses for pictures snapped at long distances.

The procession fills rows beginning from the stage and back. He follows. There s a faint trickle of sweat under his arm. Speeches of keynote speakers, the university s president, he suffers through. One row at a time, graduates empty into the aisle and walk towards the stage. Deans call names.

Champ s dean the dean of Speech Communications takes the stage. He asks the honors graduates to rise first. An ovation of cheers. Champ stands with the rest of his classmates. He s waited a lifetime for this moment. He steps into the aisle, watches classmates take the stage. Graduates stop for pictures and handshakes; grab their empty diplomas exit.

A dean calls Champ s name, he moves slowly, tires to savor the moment, looks out into the crowd in the direction of his family. Camera flashes sting his eyes. The dean hands him his diploma. He shakes hands. Rhonda waits at the end of the stage.

Six

Rhonda steps into restaurant, her black slacks she purchased them from a second hand store for ninety-nine cents are pleated in the front. Black pumps She carries her application rolled in her in hand, stained from grease, but filled out neatly in black ink, no erasures, or scribbles, her references from Depaul. Her face is made up, fake nails painted red.

She enters the restaurant, looks around, stands in line behind a line patrons. After a few orders she reaches the counter.

Welcome to Taco Fever. May I take your order? says a Hispanic counter woman. She has jet black hair, an apron stained with ground beef, and teeth spaced like a picket fence with slats missing.

No I m not here to order. I m here for an interview.

Oh, hold on a minute. The counter woman walks in the back in a room off to the side.

She ll be right out, she says when she returns, shirt is smudged with grease, hat tilted.

Rhonda walks toward the end of the counter, next to the pop machine waits. Customers walk past her with orders in hand, stop to fill cups at the machine. Rhonda eyes the production process behind the counter.

A heavysset woman walks out from hallway, brown skinned, Hispanic. Her breast hand low, her hair is black as oil. Keys looped to her belt jingle. She is hatless, a red necktie around her neck tight as a noose.

How you doing, she says when she reaches the counter. She extends her hands. I m Esperanza, the manager. And you are?

Rhonda, Rhonda Jackson. She forces a nervous smile. Her hands are cold.

Yes, Rhonda nice to meet you. You re here to interview for the prep position?

Yes.

They walk to the back of the restaurant near the windows. The sun peeks in. The plastic seats are cool through Rhonda s slacks. Outside children play on the playground.

Is that your application? Esperanza asks. She points to Rhonda s hand.

Yes, Rhonda says, still clutching the application. She s nervous, hasn t interviewed in years, but refuses to fall back onto Welfare. That would be more of the same, but things will be different this time.

Mind if I check it out?

Esperanza looks over the application while Rhonda fidgets. She tries to play back her last interview in her mind. Her legs tremble, she places her hands on lap under the table. Esperanza pulls a pen from her pocket and marks slashes on the application like she s grading papers. Rhonda wants to speak, doesn t utter a sound. The laughter, screams of children echo just outside the window. The chatter of

Spanish, and behind the counter a host of brown faces, jet black hair. She's losing confidence.

So, Esperanza finally says, it doesn't look here like you have any experience in food services?

No no I I don't, Rhonda says nervously.

Not that anybody would need any. Esperanza says. It's not rocket science.

Rhonda smiles and sighs.

Haven't worked in a while. Mind if I ask why?

Rhonda takes a moment to respond, tries to think of a suitable answer. Somehow nothing but the truth comes to mind.

I was gone for a little while, on welfare for two years before that. Her voice flutters, eyes averted like a child being chastised.

Well, everyone has problems. Looks to me like you're doing better by just being here. You could have just got right back on the system.

Rhonda wonders what the conversation has to do with the job.

A lot of our employees had some problems in the past, but that doesn't mean they aren't good workers, Esperanza adds.

Rhonda's smile eases.

Esperanza pushes out the application to Rhonda. You must have overlooked the question right here? she asks pointing. Have you ever been convicted of a felony?

Rhonda looks at the question as if the words are foreign. She wants to lie but can't she's got to start accepting responsibility for her mistakes,

Yes, I've got a felony, she says, I spent nine months in jail for theft.

Must have not been too serious if it was only a few months.

She stuns Rhonda silent.

No, she says head down, actually it's theft one.

Thanks for your honesty, you could have just lied on your application.

I'll let you in on a Taco Fever secret

Rhonda turns to give her full attention.

If we turned away people who've had trouble with the law, we'd lose like half our staff. She laughs. When can you start?

Rhonda looks puzzled. Excuse me?

When can you start? We need workers, reliable workers. And if you'll come in to work everyday it shouldn't be a problem.

Thank you, thank you, Rhonda says, her eyes welling up with tears, realizing things are falling into place just like she'd imagined.

Esperanza waits for second then repeats, When did you say you'd be available? I kind of need someone tomorrow if possible.

Let me know the time and I'll be here.

How about three? Your shift will start at four. That'll give you time to get your uniform and learn how to clock in and out. Just bring some shoes you don't

mind getting dirty and be ready to smell like ground beef. Esperanza stands, extends her hand again for a handshake.

Welcome.

They shake hands. Rhonda hurries out of the restaurant, down the street, her smile incandescent. Moving briskly, she stumbles over her heel.

Seven

He was born unloved by the world, shrieking, at Legacy Emanuel, premature by three months and three months of life critically addicted to heroin.

Dad dealt dope. Mom abused. Murder over a forty-dollar drug debt landed dad in prison three lifetimes before he can even think about release.

With her supplier jailed, mom kept her habit fed any way she could: prostitution, boosting, forgery, all crimes that landed her in jail for months at a time during Bump's infancy and early childhood. Bump lived with his grandmother, Grannie Black. She was old, couldn't control him; he took full advantage. The best she could manage was keeping food in the house, a few hand-me-downs on his back, and make sure he woke up every morning for school whether he went or not. Grannie Black died when Bump was nine. Devastated, he toured group homes, foster care, detention centers.

At school, they teased him, his height, light skin, eyes. They called him midget, shorty, white bread, half-a-nigga. Stained jeans and short shirts were his school uniform. He couldn't afford haircuts, so he wore braids when everyone else had curls and short fades. The braids were always a few days past a re-braid, frizzy, unraveling.

He fought often and hard. Infant addiction the doctors said left him imbalanced, prone to outburst, uncontrolled anger. What Grannie called, nothing but the devil, the psychiatrist labeled ADS. Time outs, suspensions, explosion; the

problems escalated. He was absent more days than present. He lost interest in school and fell way back.

Burglary the principal's house at thirteen, landed him in juvenile detention for his first extended stay; an inauguration that bred more anger, a stronger resolve to ignore the rules permanently. Loran, his mother, rescued him she thought from a group home.

Bump was fourteen, his mother in the midst of brief stint of sobriety. They lived with David his days clean measured at best in a few days sometimes a few hours. The apartment was filthy, and David lived each day on the brink of employment claimed he interviewed every few days remained unfazed by his perpetual unemployment.

Sparse furniture was around the apartment like balls of litter near a trashcan, a wooden table the legs were shaky three lawn chairs around the table. A TV, its screen the size of a hard cover book, sat on a scarred floor model TV set, its picture tube long burned out, a wire hanger angled two feet up for reception. Two rooms, no beds, just thin pee stained mattresses. Somehow David found comedy in their painful existence, could call up laughter whenever he pleased. The humor vanished when reality set in; always around the first of every month.

He drank then, was perpetually irritated by Lorna's every word. His moods lasted until he hustled up enough money for rent, a few utilities, got a stipend from the local shelter or church, or came up with a good story to stall bill collectors another month.

One night David stumbled into the apartment. He smelled of smoke and alcohol; the alcohol seeped from his pores. He'd been gone two days. His shirt was drenched with sweat, his eyes jaundiced. The door slammed behind his entrance, rattling the front windows. The house was dark the only light, the gray glare of the television, casting shadows against the walls.

Bump jumped when he heard David stumble in, then sat paralyzed in front of the TV. The picture jumped from faulty vertical hold; he was too frightened to tamper with the hanger. David stumbled past that night without a word his stench lingered wherever he walked. He entered the room where Lorna lay asleep.

Bump heard the incessant flick of the light switch; saw his mother's room switching between dark and light.

Lorna Lorna. David yelled her name his voice slurred.

Bump listened.

Lorna get yo ass up and fix me something to eat!

She didn't move.

Bitch get yo ass up. David moved away from the light switch. I said wake yo ass up. What you high?

Lorna awoke, looked up at David, eyes glazed, pupils dark as opal; she didn't speak.

Chills ran through Bump, a draft drifted in through an open window and stood the hairs on his arms.

What David? Her voice was groggy and slow, like she had trouble forming the syllables with her mouth. No I m not high.

I said get yo ass up and make me somethin to eat you lazy dope fein tramp.

Bump was fuming mad listening to David. He remained seated, clenched his fist.

Lorna rose slow. She

Make what nigga? The refrigerator s empty. Maybe if your sorry ass get a job and by some goddam groceries Anger, it was rising in David's eyes. She stopped.

David moved closer. He stumbled over a shoe, threw it against the wall.

Bump heard a thud against the wall, some wrestling, mother screamed. Another thud. Louder screams. He waited, heeded warnings from Lorna against interfering; he was seething, helpless. He walked to the doorway and looked in. Lorna was balled up in a corner in only bra and panties; her knees pushed up in her chest, her hands over face. She looked frail and weak; her ribs showed through her taut skin like brail, her knees were sharp.

David stood over her, his back to Bump; his shoulders rose and fell with exaggerated breaths. His hand was reached back.

Bitch, he said slapping her with the back of his hand. The sound echoed through the whole room. Lorna s head slammed against the wall. She didn t scream, pulled her knees closer, buried her face in her hands.

I m out here every day on foot tryin to find a job you dirty bitch. If you wasn t stickin that shit in your arm we d have some food!

He started off towards the door, glared at Bump who stood beside the door s opening. David looked like a giant then, the closer he came the larger he grew. Lorna throw a 40 bottle, beer covering just the bottom of the bottle and hit him in the back of the neck. David stumbled forward, caught his balance with one hand against the wall. With his free hand he swiped the back of his neck. His finger tips had blood on them.

Lorna s eyes were wide.

He didn t say a word. The silence frightened Lorna and Bump. After a moment David turned and looked at Lorna, blew out an exaggerated exhalation like a sprinter his mouth rounded in a circle, shoulders raised, chest expanded. He kept massaging his neck with his hand the blood trickling on his collar and taking deep breaths.

Bitch! He screamed after a while, as if the pain had just set in, or he d just acknowledged it.

Fuck you! You sorry as nigga! You ain t nothin but a fuckin drunk. Don t ever in your life put your hands on me ever! Lorna s voice was stern as if her anger had overrided her fear. Tears fell, mixed with mascara, and streaked black down her cheeks.

He close the gap between them in on extended lunge; loomed over Lorna.

She was completely still, her eyes locked against blinking. He slapped her twice across her hands and face, gripped her neck, his large hands around it like the neck of coke bottle, and raised her up until she stood.

Lorna s arms pulled futilely against his grip, and she was muted, the lack of air kept her screams trapped in her throat. She kicked at his shins with the heel of her foot.

David didn t loosen his grip. It was like he couldn t, like he was unattached from what he was doing. After a few more seconds the room grew silent, the only detectable sound was David s harsh breathing, the sound of Lora s nails scratching against his forearm.

David wrenched his grip, forearms flexed, the veins raised in his neck like garden hose.

Lorna s eyes bulged out; the tears dried up in them.

Bump stood behind him watching, helpless, thinking of a move to make, trying to find the courage to do something to help.

David turned towards him, his arms locked around Lornas s thin throat. He slammed her head against the wall.

Let her go! Bump yelled, then planted his feet and clenched his fist. He charged David, lunged up at his forarms and tore at them. He lost his grip, lunged up again. David pushed him down with one arm. He fell over the mattress, banged the back of his head against the wall, laid there shocked still.

Stay you little ass out of grown folks business!

He kept one hand around Lorna s throat, who had ceased kicking, whose eyes were bulged out like a cartoon. All the blood had left her face; the veins near her temple were thick as straws and pressed against the skin. There were red thread-like veins in her eyes; he let her drop against the wall.

He ain t gonna put his hands on you no more, mama I swear. He raised Lorna s head and held her until she fell asleep.

Hours later, Bump lay on his mattress. He couldn t sleep. His mind was busy contemplating. His breath still heavy, he couldn t stop his hands from shaking. He walked to his mother s room. The room light was still on.

Lorna slept.

You all right mama?

I ll be ok baby, don t you worry. Her throat was red and showed the imprint of David s grip.

A single tear stood in Bump s eye.

He ain t gone do this to you no more, he whispered.

She closed her eyes.

Bump walked to the kitchen. He pulled a knife out of the dishwater, a long knife. Its blade was rusted its tip broke off. Bump ran his fingers along the dull it steel, chipped along the jagged cutting edge

The whole night he d pictured David choking his mother, the tears drying up under her eye, her veins bulging out. Her body curled, absorbing blows. The back of his head throbbed; Bump rubbed the growing lump. He walked to the living room

where David lay sprawled on the floor. And stood straddled above him. He made both hands into a fist around the knife handle and raised it behind his head. David stirred, but didn't wake. Bump took a deep breath, clenched his eyes, saw only red behind them. He slammed the knife down with all his strength and screamed. Half the blade sank into his chest.

Bump pulled the knife out and stabbed again.

Cries died in his David throat.

Blood seeped from the places where the blade entered, soaking in seconds the front of David's shirt

Mama, Bump yelled.

The knife was plunged to the handle.

Lorna ran in the room. For a moment she stood silent looking at David, then at Bump, then back at David again.

On the ground David's body had begun to shake.

Oh my God, she finally said, her voice low and shaky,

Bump what did you do? The words came out slow.

I took care of it mama. He ain't gone put his hands on you no more.

Lorna pushed Bump away and picked David's head off the floor as she kneeled beside him. Bump stood beside her, looking at the body, feeling numbness, but no remorse.

That stabbing had earned Bump a long stay in juvenile detention. On his eighteenth birthday after nearly six years had passed Bump was released, a veteran of the system. The judges knew his name police, lawyers, counselors. He vowed he wouldn't go back and if he did make sure it was worth it. It didn't take long before he and Champ were running together.

They did meet years before, attended the same kindergarten class remained friends through elementary and middle school. They were friends, Bump remembered. Champ was one of the few kids that refrained from the constant teasing. They did spend weeks together at Champ's house, with Eliza and Bubba.

Teasing classmates nicknamed them Midnight and Daylight. Bump was quick to get physical lighting fires along the way Champ had a cooler head even then put fires out.

The day of Bump's last release from JDH, he knew his next trouble would be adult trouble. He wasn't afraid of being locked up, lived on the brink of felonies, accrued misdemeanors like the fat people gain weight. He did use up his chances with virtually every judge in the city.

Eight

Champ stands at the gates, searches for the intercom. He can't find Rhonda's nametag on the list. He buzzes the manager for help. A static voice echoes over the receiver.

Can I help you?

Yeah, I'm looking for Rhonda Jackson, but I can't find no name tag for her.

A static pause.

Rhonda Jackson? No name doesn't sound familiar. I don't believe we have a Rhonda in this complex. You know what apartment she's in?

I can't remember, but I know she just moved in like last week.

Oh, yes Rhonda. We kinda behind in getting our name tags up. May I ask who you are?

Shauntae her son.

Normally he's not so forthright with a responses, but knows the intercom, the gate, the inquiries are for young men who look just like him, young men who aren't stopping by for a visit, but for a sale. He knows they're necessary precatons.

Hold on one sec. I'll be right out to show to her place.

Champ leans against the fence, looks around the neighborhood, the apartment is only a few blocks from where he sold his first piece of crack. He watches two completed drug transactions in a matter of minutes. Champ knows his mother is

among temptation, wonders how long it will take for her to relapse, simultaneously wishes against it and prepares for it. He considers renting her another apartment, but realizes that idea is futile, that he's too powerless against her disease, that she can only stop herself.

The gate buzzes, a woman appears from inside it.

Come on in, she says. The woman inspects Champ's expensive clothes, diamond earrings, Rolex watch. They wind the pathway towards the back of the complex, Champ following a step behind.

You're Rhonda's son? I'm sorry, I missed your name

Shuntae

Well Shuntae, I'll have to tell Rhonda she sure does have a handsome son. I can see the resemblance. You both have those big pretty eyes. You know your mother's very beautiful?

Thank you.

I just hope she stays strong, they'll sure put you to the test around here. She stops mid-stride; her eye catches an object in a flowerbed. She pulls a napkin from her back pocket, bends, and removes a syringe. This is what I'm talkin' about. A lot of the people that come here from these rehab places aren't trying to stay clean. She shakes her head. Somebody's baby could have picked this up and played with it, she says, not so much to Champ but to herself. She continued, I'm not saying everybody around here is usin' again, I'm just saying it's not going to be easy, I mean for your mother in this environment. I mean look at this, we put these

fences up, but do you really think they're stopping anything? People, they wanna get high they're going to get high. The fences ain't keeping any dealers away just making it a little more difficult that's all.

Champ doesn't respond, listens intently. They arrive at Rhonda's building.

She seems really sincere, the woman says leading Champ up front steps. I know I sounded pretty pessimistic, but I really believe she's one of the ones who'll make it.

She points at the door.

Nice meeting you.

Champ pulls his hand back to knock, but Rhonda opens it before he can complete the action.. Her smile is wide, brilliant, but seems a little forced. They hug, her frame is slight and delicate, swallowed inside his arms. He's careful not to squeeze too hard, feels her spine through her skin like braille.

Come in come in baby. Let mama get a good look at you.

Champ walks inside, walks straight towards the sofa. He sinks down low when he sits.

You sure have grown up to be a handsome young man. You lucky I'm your mama.

You look good too mama, he says, maybe a little facetiously. The truth is she looks better than when he last saw her.

How's Kymm? How's school? When is the last time you seen your brothers?

The questions spill out. She wants to catch up too fast, can't see the impossibility of catching up a year in a few minutes.

Kymm's fine. School's cool. Be done in June. You comin' to graduation?
Champ says, trying to oblige her impatience.

Wouldn't miss it for nothin' in the world. What about your brothers?
Don't know ma, I guess they're doing ok, kind of messin' up in school, but I'm on 'em. You ain't got to worry 'bout that, you just worry 'bout gettin' back on track. Chris takin' damn good care of them knuckleheads.

Chris humph, Rhonda says.
They don't approach the subject of Champ and selling drugs.
You ready? Champ asks, I'll catc h you up over lunch. I got a surprise for you. Rhonda disappears into her bedroom, returns with a leather jacket, cracked like the road lines of a map. Her bleached white tennis shoes are scuffed at the toe.

We goin' shoppin', he announces, raising off the couch.
They hug again.
I love you mama. I know you gone be aiight.
Mama love you too baby, and don't worry, mama is through with that stuff done for good.

The restaurant is half empty. They sit, in non-smoking, by the window. The day is bright. The sun leaks in through the blinds. Champ orders a burger and fries, Rhonda a salad, a selection Champ chastises. He looks across the table at Rhonda, trying to detect some sign of her mind state, something in her eyes that says she's

actually done. He can't find it. He remembers although more faintly with the passing years how she was before the drugs.

It started eleven years ago. The first signs of despair like cracks in basement floor. Champ was precocious then, sensed something wrong, but didn't know what.

That particular day was dull; the pallid skyline smoked gray. School had been canceled and Champ hadn't wanted to spend the day with Eliza and his younger brother Chris, so he'd begged to stay with Rhonda. After spending several hours alone in his room, he made his way towards her room. He knocked lightly against her closed door.

Can I come in. He'd peeked through a crack, saw Rhonda kneeled at the foot of the bed, head sunk in the comforter, cries muffled.

She didn't answer.

He knocked again.

Mama, can I come in, he said a second time.

Yes, she said after a moment. She made not attempt to raise her head, or otherwise acknowledge his presence.

He walked in and kneeled beside her, laid his arm across her shoulders.

What's wrong? He remembered being on the verge of tears the moment he took his knee, hated seeing his mother in pain, hated more feeling helpless to stop it.

Why you cryin' ma?

She raised her head, eyes full of fresh tears, smudged mascara beneath them, Her smile was weak.

Baby, mama is just a little down right now. You know? Grown people problems. Nothin to worry yourself bout. Her trembling voice had undermined the believability of her statement, robbed Champ of the intended assurance.

It s daddy huh? The moment he d ask the question, he d known he was right. Things had been tough on them since his dad had left. They d moved from place, to place, to smaller place. Trips to the mall, had been substituted by trips to Goodwill. The Cadillac was repossessed; after months of walking Rhonda had scraped up enough cash to buy a raggedy Datsun. Its weekly repairs relegated them to the bus every few weeks.

Champ walked to his room painfully aware of his mother s condition. He lay in bed with arms crossed over his chest and cried. He prayed for intervention, he prayed to for GOD to help, just as Eliza had told him to do when he felt overwhelmed, or under-prepared. He repeated the prayer until he drifted to sleep.

Wake up baby, we going for a ride, Rhonda had said gently shaking his bed a few hours later. Her eyes were swollen from crying, her face streaked with leaking eyeliner.

Where we goin ? Champ asked. He rubbed sleep from his eyes.

Just get your coat on we goin for a ride, Rhonda said.

Recent rain slicked the streets that night, forced the Datsun to move at a crawl. The clutch stuck at stops, and up to speed, shook from bad alignment, bald

tires. They headed south down Interstate Avenue. Incomplete silence was in the car, faint whispers on the radio, the sound of Champ's breath. Rhonda pulled into a firm motel parking lot.

Champ wake up. We here, she had said shaking him in a cracking whisper. Champ opened his eyes, looked around. He followed her to a third floor room, a room numbered 335. The brass room numbers had been missing, replaced by handwritten felt tip numbers drawn croquet on the door.

Rhonda knocked. Champ stood behind her, peeked behind the door, into a room cloaked in smoke. A man stood in the threshold, slim, torn jeans, facial hair like gravel on his neck and cheeks. His afro pressed down on one side like he slept all night on it was tight as balled-up fist.

Rhonda asked, Vikki here?

Hold on a minute, he said, his lips looked liked he'd been eating powdered white doughnuts.

Vikki, he turned and hollered into the smoky room, then stepped aside. Somebody here for you.

A foul odor sneaked out the room; Champ turned his head away from it.

Let her in, Vikki's voice called out.

They entered. There were four men inside the room, three women.

Vikki Rhonda's best friend then was among them.

The gray light of a snowed TV screen illuminated the room, cast everyone inside the room in shadows. Champ sat on the bed, arms crossed neatly over his lap, afraid to touch anything. The smoke stung his eyes.

Vikki appeared out of the bathroom, the sound of the toilet flushing behind her, her red hair all over her head.

You got Champ with you girl? Hay Champ how you doin baby? Ragged, Vikki wore a men s coat stained black above the pockets, and used-to-be-white tennis shoes that flopped when she walked. Her lips were cracked, her eyes looked as if she was stunned.

One of the men dumped a chair full of clothes on the floor. Champ noticed tags danglin from almost all the clothes.

Here little man. Sit right here, a man, said and pointed at the emptied chair. His voice was gritty as wet sand. Champ eased into the seat uncomfortably aware of all his movements. The man switched channels on the TV, then through Champ the remote. The sound wasn t on; Champ watched muted. He wondered why they d not bothered to change the station. Champ watched Benny Hill for awhile, unamused, then switched the Channel.

Pass that shit, Champ heard a man yell in the background, but was scared to turn around. He sat completely still, didn t utter a word. He sat completely still and listened. After a few minutes her heard faint crackle and the sound of someone taking in a deep breath.

This got some aftertaste, Vikki blurted out.

Champ heard more crackle. The room grew quiet. Champ coughed a few times from the growing smoke.

You want to hit this Rhonda? Champ heard Vikki ask.

Champ turned his head slightly so he could see his mother from the corner of his eyes, saw her across the room lying across the bed. A cloud of smoke suspended above her. Champ noticed a scared look on his mother's face. She didn't move for a long while, like she was stalling, waiting for help to arrive that never came.

I-I guess girl, she said reluctantly. Her voice stammered. Vikki passed her a glass pipe; the stem attached to a round bowl, blackened inside like a scorched fireplace. He had the awkward feeling, a premonition, that he was seeing was something that would change his mother forever.

Rhonda put her mouth to the pipe stem, lighter to the pipe foot where a sliver of a crack lay on a mesh screen. A flame flickered from the lighter. Rhonda's eyes tightened like a child entering a room at night who's afraid of the dark. She opened them suddenly. All in the room was silent except the sound of the crack sizzling. Rhonda's eyes close eyes fluttered. She took two deep inhaleds, and coughed hard.

All that Champ witnessed. What he couldn't see, the smoke vapors, almost instantly absorbed into her lungs, brain, bloodstream. The chemicals in her brain signaling the immense rush of pleasure, a euphoria, Her temperature spike upward. He couldn't know about the tolerance that built from the first hit, that she was

addicted after the first pull. The excitement, confidence, alertness, that had vanished minutes after that first hit, only to be chased perpetually and never caught again.

They stayed two days.

Champ watches Rhonda pick in her salad, wonders if she remembers that afternoon he s too scared to ask wonders if she can see in heinsight the gargantuan repercussions of that night. She hasn t escaped that decision. He stares out the window watching cars turn into an underground parking lot then back at her. The gray light is unforgiving of the lines beneath her eyes.

What you thinkin about baby? she sips at her water.

Nothin . He conceals his thoughts, he thinks, to protect her.

Must be somethin , you haven t even touched your plate,

Champ looks down at his plate, picks a cold fry and bites off the tip.

Tell you the truth mama, I was just thinking about back in the day. That night we went to that motel on Interstate. I was thinking about how I didn t know exactly what was going on, but I remember feeling something was really wrong, like shit just wasn t right. Vikki looked so bad she scared me.

Yeah I know, Rhonda pushes her plate out, looks out the window, I think about that night all the time. Worst mistake of my life. I ain t gone never forgive Vikki.

What?

I ain t gone never forgive her for that. I would have never touched that stuff.

Champ shakes his head eyes half squinted.

Vikki, that shit wasn t Vikki s fault, Champ s voice rises, she ain t put no gun to your head. She *asked* you remember? When you start acceptin responsibility?

Champ looks around, notices errant eyes of close customers on him.

He measures the veracity of his comments against her facial expressions.

Rhonda s face crumbles.

You know what? Forget it. You ain t doing it no more right? It s over. It don t matter.

Yeah over. Mama s goin do right by you and your brothers. She pauses. The beginnings of tears are pooled in her eyes. She turns away, tries to focus her attention onthe passing cars. I m sorry baby. I m sorry I ever put you around that. I ve made so many mistakes. Tears are trickling, mixed with black eye liner, down her cheeks. I ma make it up to you, I swear. You and your brothers.

She turns back towards Champ. He hands her a napkin; she dabs her eyes.

I ma make all ya ll proud of me for once.

Champ listens. with questions that still beg answers. He refuses to submit her through the anguish. Still he can t help but think not much has changed. She hasn t accepted blame. The familiarity of excuses. He knows it s not about him, Dupree,

Chris. She hasn't grasped the reality. He takes a swallow of juice, reaches for the bill, and places a twenty on the table.

Let's hit the mall and get you some new gear, he says.

Nine

Early fall azure sky days of cooled sunshine. They were sophomores the year they met. She sauntered among a group of friends beneath the canopied park blocks. There was laughter, Kymm remembered, and the air smelled of roasted lamb. The entered Newsome Hall, garnered attention, returned it.

Kymm stood in line it extended past the ropes waiting for the dormitories. A high rising mini-skirt exposed her sleek thighs, slim ankles, smooth legs. The group she was among commanded the attention of all the male eyes in the area. They flirted with loose gazes. Inside Newsome, the line extended past the ropes. Kymm inspected where the line ended, decided to return later.

Outside the group of friends headed for the park blocks, past basement offices, past the persistent stare of several males; they glossed attention like actors trained to ignore the camera. Kymm wore white tennis shoes and yellow tank top. She had flawless skin and hair that fell past her shoulders. The day was scorching and humid; Kymm's bangs slicked with sweat swung around her forehead. She and her friends talked near the pay phones and made plans to meet later. Kymm retreated towards a park bench, sat a moment, walked out into the scattered crowd.

Excuse me? The voice sounded distant, unfamiliar. Seconds passed. Kymm heard rapid footsteps approaching.

Excuse me? said the voice again. She didn't acknowledge it, kept her pace brisk. Footsteps grew closer. A tap on her shoulder.

Excuse me, he said winded. How you doing? My name is Champ. He extended his hand and smiled. His white teeth stood out against his coal black skin.

Kymm, she said and glanced him over. He wore a white Polo shirt, jean shorts his legs and ankles thin his tennis shoes were pure white.

I saw you in Newsome with your girls, he said, trying to catch his breath.

And?

And? he paused, I had to come say somethin to you. Didn t want to let the opportunity slip. Couldn t let a beautiful young woman pass me by without speakin .

Kymm smiled.

Kymm you mind if I ask you a question?

She paused.

Depends, she said.

You got a boyfriend? Champ held his focus on her eyes waited.

She was quiet.

No. no boyfriend, she said, and tried unsuccessfully to conceal a wry smile.

No boyfriend? Champ said. So does that mean I can take you out sometime?

Kymm paused a moment, brushed her bangs aside, licked her lips.

Yes. She said in a tone neither confirmed nor denied her interest in Champ, that would be fine.

What Champ didn't know then was how good his timing was. His timing was perfect. She'd just broken-up with her boyfriend of eight months. Champ rummaged his pockets for a pen. He tore open a gum wrapper and scrolled Kymm's phone number down.

Hey what you doin' right now? He stuffed the number in his pocket.

Why?

I was just asking 'cause I'm done here and if you ain't got no plans I thought maybe we could grab something to eat?

Silence.

I don't know about that, she said, but knew her schedule, for hours, was empty.

Come on beautiful. I promise I won't bite.

Maybe an hour.

Their lunch conversation lasted hours.

Kymm fumbles with her keys at the apartment door. Her eyes water.

Pregnant, she repeats in her mind.

Her life feels broken up, she's trying to fit together the pieces, is troubled by the current state of their relationship.

Sleep the past weeks has been harassed by a persistent dream a nightmare. It begins with an argument. Champ storms out of the house in anger, remains gone through the night. And when morning comes there's a knock. Kymm walks to the

door nervous, her hands trembling. Two officers stand in the threshold, their faces
somber.

We d like you to identify they start off, but never finish. Kymm
collapses in tears.

Ten

He pulls a paper sack out of the armrest, conceals it in an inside pocket, surveys the parking lot half empty and exits the Lexus. Mysterious, the white man parked in a white sedan, beneath the carport. Their eyes meet briefly; they each look away. Through the parking lot, the pavement damp from recent rain, he walks. He ascends the stairs, two flights, to a third floor apartment. He fumbles with his keys, finds the right key; the door opens before he can insert it. Dorothy stands behind the door her thighs exposed, clothing scant, a sheer negligee; her dark brown nipples show through.

What you doin' here? There's sincerity in his surprise.

I live here remember?

No. I mean I called about thirty minutes ago, right before I came. Nobody answered. He's speaking to her breast, can't avert his gaze, wouldn't if he could. Music plays in the background, emanates from the TV.

I was in the shower, she says.

She turns and walks away from the door. Her hair is pulled up, water visible around the nape of her neck where loose hairs stick. Her hips are speaking to him. He's trying to stay focused, trying to ignore her invitation. She saunters into the kitchen she knows that's where he'll go and opens the refrigerator. She bends at the hips, like she's hinged, and salutes him. Removes an apple, rinses it in the sink

and bites sumptuous like Eve surely must have bit. Champ touches his crotch; it was swelled. She walks to the room, leaves her door wide open.

You doing that on purpose, he says moments after she s entered the room.

What?

Champ hears her taking bites of her apple. He walks to her bedroom and looks in. Dorothy sits on her bed, one knee raised, stroking her thigh and foot her thigh and foot with lotion.

Champ watches without a word, stands fully erect.

Walk like that. Answer the door in that see through nightgown, he pauses, Damn a brother came here to handle his business.

Champ admits moments like this he loses sight of Kymm. Not because of love, or the lack of it, but something more primal. She can t supply his constant need for conquest. Moments like these he thinks of everything she is not.

This is my apartment Champ in case you forgot. That means I can walk around here butt ass naked if I want, she looks up. Fragments of sun, through the blinds, highlight her eyes, besides that, I ain t got nothing you ain t seen. You wanna handle that business or get your little thang thang wet? Choice is yours.

Champ walks back into the kitchen. He pulls a pot from the lower cabinet, fills it half-full, and sets it on the stove to medium heat. He peeks in the laundry room, pulls his duffel bag from the top shelf. Inside a large plastic Ziplock filled with clumps of cocaine. He removes the Ziplock and his scale, a triple beam. He lays clumps on the weighing surfaces of the scale the size and shape of

saucers until the scale evens at two hundred and fifty grams. He pours the clumped cocaine in a Pyrex measuring cup, crushes into fine powder with the tip of a wooden butcher knife.

Guess you really do have some business? Dorothy calls from her room.

Champ stops beating the cocaine. He closes his eyes, shakes his head. She is only half covered her naked breast exposed when he enters the room. The television plays muted; its gray light casts shadows on her face.

Champ strips his clothes by the door, leaves them strewn in the threshold, climbs into bed, presses against Dorothy's warm skin. The sheets are cool, slightly rough as if they've been starched. He kisses her neck and breast, moves hastily. He slides his hand between her thighs, touches her wet vagina, sees no point in further foreplay, and ceases it quickly. He climbs atop her.

He enters, a little difficult at first, then not. Dorothy moans, holds a breath with her mouth agape. He strokes with hesitation, pulls to the tip pauses and re-enters. She trembles beneath him, claws his back her hands are busy traces his buttocks with her fingers. The pleasure erases, for the moment, his guilt. They move together like actors trained to make love for cameras, their body responding dutifully their minds, perhaps, in other places. Champ cums like an explosion.

They lay beside one another foreheads dappled with sweat like exhausted athletes. Her arms across his chest, his hand on her thigh. Guilt seizes him suddenly. He moves her arm, pulls his hand from her thigh and raises.

Something wrong?

Nah, he says, his voice walking toward bathroom. He sounds unconvincing. I just gotta get this shit ready. I got folks waitin on me.

Kymm, in the apartment; she soothes her stress with chores. She s contemplating ways to break the news. In the kitchen she unloads dishes, stacks them in cabinets. Inside the cabinet, top shelf, near the back, sits a brown paper bag. She climbs atop the counter and pulls the bag out. She places it on the counter and rolls down the edges. It s weighted with stacks of cash, bundled with rubberbands. There s a small digital scale under the money.

She lays the money bundled in thousands as best she can tell and the scale on the countertop. She counts out fifteen stacks then places them back in the bag. She stares at the money, with a strange mixture of fury and appreciation. She hates Champs greed appreciates the material things his greed allows them to have. She s certain the greed will consume him. She massages her stomach, walks to the full-length mirror and examines her profile. There s no evidence of pregnancy, none physical. She believes everyone can see.

The phone rings. She s reluctant. Hello. Her voice stammers. On the couch, in the living room; her legs are crossed; her head is bowed.

Kymm Church please, the voice blares across the receiver, an intrusion against her hearing.

This is Kymm.

The doctor would like to schedule a follow-up appointment.

Silence. She's on the verge of tears. She pulls the receiver away from her face.

Hello Kymm are you there?

Yes yes I'm here. She's composing herself, captures a deep breath, holds, exhales.

Would next Wednesday be a good day for you? At that point we can schedule and ultrasound and take a few test to make sure everything's OK.

She pauses.

Wednesday's fine.

Is noon a good time for you?

She can't think of her schedule. Her thoughts are scattered.

Noon? Yes noon.

Alright then Kymm we'll see you next Wednesday the twenty-fourth at noon, with Dr. Bartley, here at the clinic.

The phone falls from Kymm's hand like she's lost the strength to hold its weight. She pulls her knees to her chest, presses her head between them. She'd dreamed of pregnancy before as a child, a young girl; she's never imagined it would occur under these circumstances. She's dreamed of graduation, career, marriage, and children. She's never imagined any other order. In Champ she had nothing she'd dreamed of. She thinks of raising a child without him likely if he continued; she thought of raising one with him, that thought was almost equally alarming. She clenched her eyes clipping lingering tears.

The clatter of keys behind the door. Champ enters. She doesn't look up. In the kitchen he drops his keys on the counter; they slide a few inches across it. He opens the cabinet and reaches for the brown paper sack. He can't see her or rather he hasn't bothered to acknowledge her; he's preoccupied. Kymm mutes her cries, raises her head, and wipes away the remaining tears; she's composing herself. She walks to the window.

Champ notices his scale on the counter top. He picks it up to inspect it.

You been fuckin' with my shit again! His voice echoes like voices at the entrance of a tunnel through the house. He pulls the bundles of cash and lays them on the counter.

What the hell I tell you 'bout touchin' my shit

He storms in the living room. Kymm stands near the window, between parted blinds she looks out, without a word say a word; her hands tremble. Behind her, inches away, his breath is warm against her neck.

You ignoring me? Anger cracks in his voice; he can't see past it.

She doesn't answer, keeps her back to him. She's drowning in despair. She contemplates avenues of revelation. Her lack of response infuriates Champ.

Answer me when I'm talkin' to you dammit.

She turns to him, swollen beneath her eyes, mascara tear dropped away.

I'm pregnant!

Champ s mouth circled, eyes stunned open.

Silence.

Eleven

Come on in sir. What can I do for you? Mister asks. He smiles. Champ enters the store; a bell announces his entrance.

Came down here to check your sales. Got any specials? Champ asks.

The store is sparsely filled. A bum searches, in his pocket, for coins he doesn't have. He removes a wine bottle from the cooler, staggers towards the register.

Well young fella, you came to see the right man today. I'll be with you in a minute sir. Teenage boys, pants belted at the knees, their indigo blue jeans creased sharp as knives, bandanas hanging from their back pockets, stand in line behind the bum.

An elderly woman pushes a walker down cramped aisles. Miss Johnson you need some help back there young lady? Mister's voice, slow and measured, most time just above a whisper. That'll be two dollars and fifty-nine cents, he says to the teens buying Garcia Vega cigars. He inserts a five-dollar bill into the cash register.

Hey mister, when you gonna throw me a job? My PO been on my shit, one teen says stuffing the change in his pocket.

Come see me next week.

They make their way towards the metal-framed door.

Y'all be safe, Mister says. A bell confirms their exit.

The bum staggers towards the front counter, clutches a bottle of Thunderbird; condensation slides down this hand. He reeks of alcohol, urine, dried sweat.

Mister I m a little short on my medicine, he says rummaging his pockets.

What s new JR? Red. Mister calls Red who scurries in from a side room. Stoic, scruffy beard, thin hairline, Red rarely speaks.

Get ole JR a broom so he sweep out the front.

Red vanishes into a back room

JR waits, a toothless smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. He caresses the bottle s neck. You know I quit drinkin once, he tells Mister, Back in 1982.

How long that last?

Four days, he says, receiving the broom from Red. I blew out my knee and couldn t make it to the store.

Don t thank me brother, you workin for it. Sweep out front and pick up round them garbage cans out back.

JR heads for the front door; Red wanders behind the counter to the back room. Vacant, the store, save Mister and Champ.

Well Mr. Jackson. I hear you ve been havin some troubles lately. He crosses his arms like a chastising parent.

You heard? Surprise leaks in his voice.

Keep my ear to the streets.

I got it handled. Champ says. His voice lacks authority.

Mister, stern face, gazes hot as sun beams, looks at Champ.

Don t do nothin you don t want to do, but let me tell you this — Mister pauses, leans over the counter.

You got two choices. Only two. You can either handle this cat or you can get out the game. Mister lets another awkward pause linger, continues his thought, If you don t send a message, shit like this gone keep happenin , they gone keep testin you and one of these fools gone end up killin you.

A pause. A chill runs through Champ. He studies Mister s eyes, finds no hint of play. I ain t tryin to see that happen to you brother.

Nervousness tugs at Champs stomach, stifles his response.

I got robbed once back when I was coming up and an OG told me just what I m tellin you?

Yeah, Champ says, although he was scared of the reply and almost certain he would regret its revelation once told.

I don t know who did it, but let s just say ole boy ain t around to brag. He ended up with holes in his ass, holes in his eye, his mouth, and each of his hands.

Champ picks some cent candy from a counter box to busy his hands

He got shot his ass in the hands so he wouldn t never take from nobody else, in his mouth so he couldn t tell, and one in his eye so every time he look in the mirror he will remember what he did.

Mister retells his story stripped of emotion. He could have been talking about anything at the point, his inflections, tones, breaths would have remained the same. The ability the ability to speak free and candid about something so violent so

heinous, imposes in Champ an unprecedented fear. He studies Mister's countenance, scrutinizes him like a suspicious stranger. Mister's eyes are cold, distant, dark. He wonders, no longer, if he's killed, but how many now. He studies Mister's eyes, cold, distant, dark. There's ambivalence in his voice, a tendency for violence; he's mocking of it.

I got some boys from back home that I'll handle this for you. Five G's will get it done. You just fly 'em up, drop the loot, and give 'em a name. Then go take a trip for a few days.

Champ considers, momentarily, the proposition, amazed at the ease of arranging murder. Five thousand for a life, how cheap for death. Is Rob's life worth so little because he'd robbed, stolen, deceived? And if that value was accurate what's the value of his life?

You serious? He's buying time.

I don't joke 'bout no shit like this. Mister walks from the counter, the scent of cologne trailing him, out into the aisles counter, He flips over the open sign and returns to the counter. He says nothing.

These cats real as they come, from the city. Ain't no play cats. They real killers, Mister says.

I don't know man. I got to think that shit over. An image strikes him, of that evening, Rob's evil eyes casts on him. He remembers the smell of the leather gloves, the thud of his heart. He knows he can't let it slide. This resolution settles on him, strips away his fear, replaces it with calm. He needs only a plan of action.

Let s handle this business, Mister says motioning Champ behind the counter.

To the rear of the store they walk pasta partially open save, inside stacks of bills lay. They occupy Champ s attention. Beyond the safe, a table folding chairs pushed against it, dominoes sprawled across it, beyond the table a door that leads to the basement. An iron door bolted top, middle, bottom. The hinges are thick as table legs.

Mister fishes from his pocket a set of keys. Unlocks each bolt with the care of surgeon. A light, her turns on, that leads down a steep flight of stairs. They descend them, the wood creaks from their weight, a guardrail unhinged, leans against the wall. Dark, the basement, light sneaks in through barred windows. Champ searches, arms, legs out, for items that might stumble. Mister finds an overhead light, pulls the hanging string, exposes the wooden table legs unsteady and stool beneath it. Champ takes a seat. Face up neat stacks of cash; they lay beside a holed duffel bag.

Champ pulls stacks of cash from his pockets, pants, jacket, his socks, lays them separate on the table. He recounts his stacks.

What you got for me? Mister unzips the duffel bag.

Eighteen five. Champ touches the money as he counts. I changed it up at the bank for big bills.

All at once

Nah, a little bit at a time, at different banks, ain't tryin' to catch no fed case.

I got sense.

You best. Anything over ten thousand at a bank and they on you like crack heads on a loose piece of dope.

Mister removes a kilo from the bag. And when they got you it's over. They takin' time and ya' stack.

Wrapped in duck tape, book sized, the kilo. Two inches thick. He tosses it to Champ.

When you gone give me a little price break? You know I'm hurtin' after that loss, Champ says.

Mister smiles, in the caught in the dark his face all shadow and white teeth. He rubs his chin, crosses his arms. Give me eighteen for 'em. I take care of my people.

Mister's lack of hesitation, makes Champ believe he's been overcharged. Unsettled, he is, his hands accepting the weight, more than the two point two pounds the scale measures. The weight of years incarceration. He can't hold a brick without it. He knows he accepts much more without knowing. He trembles

Let's go upstairs. I'll fix my young patna up with a bag.

When you need the bread?

Whenever, you can get it to me, but give me mine off top.

They ascend the stairs, the hallway narrow like a tunnel with collapsing walls. Mister hands Champ a brown paper sack. He walks him to the door, flips the open sign, unlocks.

Be Safe.

The bell announces Champ's exit. Outside, the sounds of faint traffic, the sky a gray haze, the sun peeking through. He keeps his head lowered. A familiar path from door to car, package in hand, brisk pace.

His fear based on unconfirmed rumors. Rumored, in the in the distance, unseen, men holed up watching, waiting, tallying. Patience, surveillance, surprises their weapons. Their targets: the store, Mister, his customers. Champ feels as if his bag is made of clear plastic, contents on display. He knows they're watching; he can feel their eyes on his back. The uneasiness of an anonymous gaze extends the time from door to door an eternity.

Took you long enough, Bump says, slumped in the passenger seat. A joint half-smoked dangles from his lips.

He know.

Know bout what?

Bout that shit with Rob.

On Bump's face a look of genuine surprise.

How he find out?

Said it's in the streets and I got to handle it.

Champ looks at Bump his expression blank. Conversation pauses. He hands him the package, starts the car.

Bump, present for all transports. Bump, the essential component of the pick up, the designated runner, the throw guy. He slides the package inside his jacket.

Seatbelts, Champ says.

They emerge into traffic. Champ lowers the stereo, checks his mirrors. Quiet inside the car, outside the thrum of tires, the engine hums.

Bump sits, questions aching in the pit of his stomach.

Quiet. Champ focuses his attention on traffic, refuses to let his mind wander. Clouds move over the city. Through patches of sunlight they drive, it s raining, a block later, it s not. They check front, rear, side views constant, stay in the right lane for easy exits, speed just above the limit. A car follows for three blocks, they turn right down a side street; the car stays straight. Two turns, they return to the main street. Police cars, government cars, vans, unmarked white sedans, cause panic.

One time, Bump says, a slight inflection, calm that betrays anxiety. An unmarked police car positioned cornerside near a four-way intersection. The car pulls out behind the Lexus.

Just be chill.

Chill, we got a bird in the car. You chill. Bump s calm evaporates.

Known for exaggeration, Bump s rightfully worried Champ admits silently. He knows he has reason for concern, reasons for fear, if not terror. Champ tight grips the wheel, keeps his head straight, checks the rearview mirror.

Damn! Champ says.

What?

They runnin the plates.

Bump looks, conspicuous, over his shoulder. The passenger side officer leans down. I m runnin , he says.

Nah, we aight. Champ feigns assurance. I got license, insurance, and no warrants. They can t fuck with us.

The light changes, they fall into traffic, makes the first available right onto Fremont.

Flashing lights.

Quiet inside the car, they pull curbside. I told yo ass, Bump says, I m breakin

We cool. They can t fuck with us.

Man I got a warrant! Bump says.

You got a what? Why you ain t tell me?

Cause you ain t ask.

The officers approach one to each side. Bump adjusts the brick in his jacket.

Champ rolls down his window.

Somethin I can help you with officers? Did I do somethin wrong? he says. Weakly, he smiles.

Nice car, the officer says flashing a croquet smile. Let me get your license, registration, and proof of insurance. A white officer, slim, pregnant belly. The licenses, the documents, he takes and heads back to the car.

Haskins he yells across the car. Haskins gaze is fixed on Bump. Motionless, soundless, Bump remains idle, muted, stiffened by fear. He s trying to conceal the sound of his breath. Can you keep an eye on these fellas while I go run this info?

Haskins, black, husky frame, thin eyebrows. Champ sits still, arms in view, quiet, still pondering his options, which seem shrinking with each one of Bump s concealed breaths.

Champ, Bump whispers. If they ask me for my stuff I m breakin on these fools.

The officer returns, license and registration in hand, a pale look of disappointment evident on his square chin, diminutive eyes.

Here s your papers. He throws them in Champ s lap. You boys free to go now. What s a twenty-year old guy riding around in a fancy Lexus registered in his name? Must have a damn good job. A victorious smile broke across his face, as he slid his license inside of the armrest.

As a matter of fact I do, he says confident, a damn good job.

Champ slides his window up. He pulls slowly away from the curb.

Twelve

She'll surprise them, she thinks. She anticipates their reactions. The months have seemed like years, torture without them. Her kids are all she has to live for. She's thankful to Chris for stepping in when she couldn't, but knows they're her children to raise. Months have passed since she's seen or hugged them, kissed their cheeks. Dupree especially she misses, her youngest, her baby. She's been a part-time sporadic mother for him, nothing more, wants desperately for him to know more of her. Motherhood is all she has left to cling to, the single validation of her life. Without her kids, she knows, she won't make it.

She slides on her jeans, tennis shoes and pink t-shirt. She stuffs fifty-dollars in her pocket, the remainder of her check. She walks to the bus stop, sprinkles fall light, then cease. Rhonda shivers against the wind, decides against returning home for her jacket. White creases, centered, streak her jeans. Her shoelaces are stark white and unraveling from washings

The bus pulls up, number six, headed downtown. She boards. At five-thirty, commuters men, women, bodies slunk in their seats, faces tired are headed home. Kids occupy the backseat, across the rear of the bus. They giggle, gesture at the bus riders. Rhonda looks out, watches the city whirl past, the slim houses of Northeast, the slim buildings of downtown. Plumes of smoke spill from bus tailpipe. The engine growls. The bus interior littered with graffiti. Slashed the vinyl seats. Rhonda exits the bus at the mall, enters on the main floor of Mitchum and Kelly

department store. She descends the escalator to the basement floor, walks out into the crowded mall. Near a set of doors, she stops at the mall directory, starts towards the music store.

Inside a group of boys listen to headphones positioned on the wall. A young girl stands behind the counter talking up another smiling teenage boy. A white kid, spiked red hair, dog collar around his neck, browses through the rock section.

Rhonda walks near one of the boys, who are listening to CDs. She taps his shoulder.

Excuse me, she says while the boy still bobs to music. He doesn't turn.

Excuse me, she taps again. The boy turns like he's irritated, sees Rhonda, changes his expression.

Yeah?

I don't mean to bother your groove session, but I was just wondering what you were listening to?

Jay-Z

He a rapper?

A bemused stare.

Yeah,

I have two sons about your age and I wanted to get them a CD, is this Jay-Z guy a pretty good choice?

The best, he says and puts the earphones back on. He turns again, bobs his head, ignores Rhonda. She buys a magazine, exits the mall through the basement

floor of Mitchum and Kelly. Across the street, she walks to the canopied bus stop. Behind the stop a park.

The bus arrives. She rides downtown, transfers. The third bus the last she'll catch before reaching her destination is quiet. Three total passengers, all adults scattered in the seats. The driver, round face spiked beard, smiles when Rhonda boards. They head up sixth street, turn right, head west where the boy's live with Chris senior. Quiet ride, changes in scenery, the liquor stores have disappeared, the corner stores replaced by Seven Eleven's. Bare street poles unlittered by flyers, posters.

Rhonda rings the bell, exits a stop later. The neighborhood. Wide streets paved smooth, sidewalks like lanes on a track, culdesacs. Girls ride bikes with u-shaped handlebars, banana seats; boys ride dirt bikes with treaded tires like stubble. Basketball hoops hang curbside every few blocks. The air is cool, the rain has subsided, rivulets in places on the windshield. The houses are all similar in structure and colors, with paved driveways that wind up to expansive porches. Manicured lawns, flowerbeds, flowers bloom. Late model sedans, station wagons, SUV's, are parked in driveways, and two-car garages. Brass numbers address the porches.

Rhonda ambles along.

Seeing the material possessions makes her think of what she doesn't have, the decisions that kept them out of reach. She knows she can't support Chris, Dupree, on the meager checks she earns at Taco Fever. They're scarcely enough to cover her bills. But she loves her boy's like no one else can, Chris Sr. or otherwise. She

hopes that's enough. And she'll keep working, keep looking for ways to get ahead, she's lived the past eleven years behind. She's formulating the first important words, toiling over them. They'll have to be right. But what's right? She's hoping they won't be able to control their excitement. She stops a block away, tucks her t-shirt, pats the loose hairs sprouting from her ponytail. She walks up the driveway to the porch.

A wide picture window. She looks in black leather couches adorn the living room, a cow print rug but no movement. She rings the bell. The house seems empty despite the car parked in the driveway. Footsteps behind the door, the sound of heels on hardwood floors. The door opens.

Helen, Chris' wife, stares, says nothing, when she opens the door.

Are my sons here?

Helen's face turns sour, her lips. Silk blouse, black knee length skirt, hair pulled back, she looks as she's recently returned from work.

You tell Chris you were coming?

Tell Chris what, Rhonda says irritated, Why I got to tell somebody I'm coming to see my sons? They

Rhonda switches hands with the bag.

Wait, Helen says cutting short Rhonda's sentence, with an abrupt door slam.

Rhonda peeks through the window. Helen disappears in a back room. She's angered now, but won't let it ruin her reunion. Before Depaul she might have argued, fought, but she's learned better.

The door opens. Chris stands inside.

Rhonda, says smirking, nice to see you. I thought you didn't get out for another week or so? Traces of condescension. He doesn't open the screen.

You came to see the boys?

Quiet, she's suppressing her anger. She knows they're testing her, searching for a weakness, but a weakness she won't show. She can't be cracked.

Yes, where are they?

Why didn't you call?

Dupree appears behind Chris. Daddy, can me and

Dupe it's your mama, Rhonda says.

Mama! He moves in front of his dad, opens the screen door, steps outside.

Rhonda kneels. They hug. Oh baby, I missed you so much, she says, your mama missed you so much. She lets him go, steps back arms length away, Let me get a look at you. She turns him. Look at my baby, you growing up ain't you? Where's your brother?

Chris. He's down stairs. I got get him. Dupree takes screaming.

When he leaves Chris is standing in the doorway. Rhonda erects, brushes her knee. You were saying? she says smirking.

I was saying you need to call before

Mama, mama. From somewhere in the background the voices of Chris, Dupree, grow louder, a rising whine.

Chris. Rhonda lights up. Chris storms on the porch, hugs her. how you been doin baby?

Fine.

I missed you ma. I missed you.

Chris senior looks on, quiet, arms folded. Chris, some things have changed, some haven't; she tames him with silence. Helen moves behind him, like a frightened child.

Oh, I almost forgot, I got this for you guys. You re gonna have to share it.
You guy s like Jay-Z?

The boys look at each other excitedly. Yeah, they say. Mama know about Jay-Z, Dupree says.

Sure I do. I m hip. There s a magazine in there for y all to look at too.

The day they spend, outside playing basketball. Rhonda breath short she has one good lung her jeans stained with dirt. They walk the neighborhood hand in hand talking of past days, and the future. They plan their next visit, skating hotdogs.

Thirteen

Fifteen. Champ then a sophomore. Bump a sophomore in years, the credits of eighth grade. It had been chilly that evening, the wind lifted loose candy wrappers, blew plastic milk cartons, battered windows, shook power lines. It had been well past midnight, the moon settled in the sky, the stars hung big as planets. Champ, Bump, gaits swift, devoured litter-filled streets, hands pocketed, aware sounds, movements out of place; their nerves were on edge. Headlights ahead froze them, still as ice-blocks, held still by fear and uncertainty. Flight deterred by advice they'd received: don't run.

Eyes locked on the headlights, ears listened to the engine grumble. The car slowed beside them; a voice emptied out.

Soup?

Champ walked ahead, cradled the plastic bag in his pocket, thumbing the tight knot. Bump, brazen, approached the car.

What's crackin'? He asked. His voice was confident, a mask he shielded himself with it; he'd spent one night on the block. Maybe, he had hustle in his blood. The front passenger, a woman, leaned out her face, thin everywhere: chin, cheek, nose, lips, and neck. Bump walked to her window.

Sixteenth, she said.

Breaking the rules of stealth, Bump dug in his pocket, pulled out his sack, unknotted the tie. Champ stopped a few feet away, enough distance to separate. He stood watch.

What s your name little man? The thin lady asked. She smiled. A seasoned smoker; she had a permanent pipe crease in her burned bottom lip; her eyes looked glazed with Vaseline.

Bump, he said. He added baritone, puffed out his chest.

Bump can you do the three dubs for fifty?

Tiny white rocks in the bottom of the plastic bag, three white rocks in his extended palm, inside the car. The thin woman slapped Bump s hand; the car screeched off. Bump watched the getaway from the middle of the street. Champ stood silent; he shook his head. They walked in silence.

After a few blocks Bump said, Mutha fuckas!

Money first, next time bro, Champ said, his voice was calm, we gotta stick to the rules, we new boodies, and I can t afford to have my dad come pick me up from no juvenile.

Lost sixty bucks. That shit was half my profit, Bump said

After a few blocks they made it to Sumner Street; they walked towards Ninth Avenue. Youngsters on every corner, hugged the block, pants sagged past kneecaps, down coats, hats turned backwards. Cars drifted slow, headlights extinguished, engines sputtered. Every few seconds a whistle, someone yelled, Woody woo, soup?

They stopped on fourteenth, posted on adjacent corners. Champ's spot: a concrete retainer wall, waist high, it retained the grassy field of a burned down house and its scattered remnants: charred wood, molded roof shingles, lamp fixtures, a scorched stuffed Teddy bear, a smoke blackened metal toaster, a melted plastic foot tub. Champ clutched his bag for reassurance; he glanced over his shoulder, down the street, behind him; he checked his blind spots.

Bump leaned against a street sign, head cocked, his giant Bulls parka swallowed his frame, his lips turned down; his afro puffed out the sides of his Bulls baseball cap. The mangled sign, bent from car accidents, surrounded with skid marks, littered with broken glass like gravel. He swirled it with his black Chuck Taylor's — red thumb-thick laces — the glass glided smooth across the sole, where the tread was worn smooth.

A figure struggled with an empty shopping basket, stumbled, lost control, lost the basket, turned on its side in the street. Champ watched intent; his face eluded no sign of emotion. The figure, a man, pushed the cart in the middle of the street. His back hunched over the basket; he stopped every few steps, searched the ground for loose anything.

He stopped near Champ, flashed a forced smile.

Soup? He asks.

Champ was reluctant to respond; he surveyed the man, searched for clues of addiction. Eyes low, hand too black for pipe burn detection; he saw nothing.

Little man, you got some soup? I'm tryin' to spend with you, he says again.

What you need?

OK check this out, he says, his face grew animated under the dim street lights; he straightened his back, I got a white boy round the corner wanna spend big with you, but I need a little tester, let em know your shit is the truth.

Champ s recalling advice now, his only guard; he can t respond from experience. *Never give credit* he thought; the advice ran in his head.

Ain t nothin free

The man interrupted, Nah, not free youngin , He dug in his pocket. He pulled out a bill, kept it secret in his fist, offered it to Champ. Here take this. Nah, don t look at it, just put it in your pocket, and break me off a little piece of one them hubbas,

Never make a transaction out in the open. He moved beyond the reach of light, in the shadows of a house. His heart quickened. Champ reached in his pocket, untied the knot on the plastic baggie. Between forefinger and thumb he felt pill size, found a nice sized pill and laid it on his palm. He chopped a piece with his thumbnail.

Here, he said; he tried to still his hands. He thought about school the next day, homework, being discovered by an adult, his mother. The smoker inspected the pill, popped it in his mouth, started down the street.

I ma check this out, be back in a minute if its cool.

Champ waited, took his seat on the concrete wall.

Get that paper, Bump yelled from his post, hold it down for ya block, he screamed.

Champ nodded; the fall air stung his face, ears, lips. The wind cut through his Trailblazer parka. He hated the cold; he d been devising a plan to escape it, to escape the block, he recorded mental notes, critiqued advice. He knew there was an easier way. He watched Bump complete a transaction in the driveway of a vacant house, the houses were windows boarded; they stood in the shadows.

A cart rattled in the distance. The smoker had returned, his figure moved between well lit, then fell sudden into a tunnel-like blackness, the blackness of burned streetlights. The cart jerked along, front wheels — raised off the concrete — twirled in circles. He made his way to Champ.

That was some bomb soup you had youngin . White boy say he wanna spend the c-note with you off the top. Can you do the six pills? His moved in jerks, convulsions; he couldn t stand still.

Five, Champ said.

C'mon bro, I m get the white boy to spend witcha, but you gotta work with me. He shifted his weight from side to side, tapped his feet; his arms hung limp.

Aight, I got a half-a-pill for you, Champ said, leery. He calmed himself with the prospect of money. He dug in his pocket, pulled out his sack, stepped beyond the light s reach.

I know you got them Hubbas, the man said. He had his hand to his forehead, a salutation; he leaned forward then backwards.

Champ ignored the erratic movements, picked out five pills, broke the tip off a sixth; he cupped them, approached the buyer.

That s what *I m* talkin bout youngin . Juice gonna help you get this money.

Juice stuck out his leg, bent his lower back, extended his hand like a waiter, palm opened, ask anybody in this hood, everybody Juice rush money like Emmit Smith.

Juice threw the pills in his mouth, grabbed his basket handles, stumbled off.

Champ watched him disappear around the corner.

Fourteen

Every two weeks a meager paycheck. Hours later, a day, after bills and sparse groceries there s nothing. Hardly money enough for bus fair. A pair of jeans, a shirt, belt, she can t afford shoes, out of the question. Three months working, three months of clinging to a shortened rope fraying at the ends. Pride has kept her away, but pride won t feed her, cloth her.

Morning, the wind whistles, branches tremble, leaves stir and break free, swoon to the ground. The pavement is wet. Above the sky is a gray haze. The rain falls light. Rhonda ambles along the sidewalk; the wind howls cuts through her thin jacket. She folds her arms, pulls them close to her chest, hugs herself against the wind. A strong gust stings her face. Rhonda turns her back against it, walks a few steps backwards, ducks behind the trunk of a large tree. She stands until the howling ceases. She steps back onto the curb, holds the handle of her umbrella with a fierce grip. The winds tugs at it, blows it the wires bend inside out. Its lifts her like a parachute.

The Welfare office s parking lot is sparsely scattered with cars. She hopes the office will be equally sparse. At the entrance she shakes out her umbrella, snaps it closed, places it under arm. The office is assuaged with the sour smell of must and mildew; the stench stings her nostrils. She grabs papers from the counter top she doesn t need to ask which ones, she s a veteran of public assistance and takes them to a small table and begins filling them out.

The line to see case workers stretches from wall to wall several times they must not have cars and moves at a languid pace. She knows she has hours of wait. She scribbles information without thought. She picks up her papers and walks, its an expedition, to where she can see the line ends. Rain falls from her sleeves on the carbon papers. The ink smudges in spots, bleeds into circles. She refuses to relinquish her spot in line.

People wander in the building, stare exasperated at the line, a line with no end in sight. She guesses at their stories they each have one by judging their expressions, the slump of their frames, the bend of their necks. Rhonda knows they didn't wake up needing government assistance for survival. She's sure some were doctors, lawyers, college professors, buckled by hard times, and flagrant circumstances. They're recovering now, like spent boxers sent to their corners.

She can spot the ones who've suffered the blow most recently. Darkness in their eyes identifies them. They wander around the office unaware of the protocol, looking dazed, too scared to ask for assistance. They've deserted their pride.

He enters. Rhonda watches. He's peculiar, coat-less, hair soaked with water, dripping and slicked against his skull. His shoes open at the toe, he has invisible hands; his sleeves don't stop at the wrist. He walks past, head lowered, like he's following his feet for direction. She follows him with her eyes. He ignores the papers and the line that stretches out of the door now. He sits in the cramped waiting area. Wet clothes squeak on the vinyl seats. There's a woman next to him. She puts a finger to her nose, shakes her head, leaves her seat. Others follow. Rhonda

guesses at his age, nineteen twenty at most, the burdens of twice as many years he carries on his shoulders. She wants to help, but refused to relinquish her position in line. After a few minutes he raises. He trudges toward the exit. He hasn't seen a face in the entire building. He pushes through the doors. The rain beyond the building slaps his face.

He is replaced, after a few minutes, by a young girl. Her hair long, wavy, and black runs to the small of her back. Her feet dangle from the edge of the seat. She wears a skirt; her legs are thin as forearms. She doesn't smile or frown; her hands are folded across her lap. She reminds Rhonda of her childhood before the accident.

The family then: Rhonda older brother Butch, Jerome and Edward each separated by a year. Dad, named Andrew, was a college student, in the days in when most Southern Blacks obtained barely a high school education. Andrew was a Jackson of the well respected Jacksons of Montgomery the only son of Edith and Andrew Jackson. He was as proud as a colored man could be in those days his pride teetered on haughty.

Andrew and Mary-Alice. They courted against the wishes of Andrew's parents, Andrew a college freshman, Mary-Alice a high school junior. First pregnancy came at nineteen. Marriage and a second pregnancy at twenty-two, one and twenty-two, breaks between them were short four children in four years. Her shape was altered.

At twenty-five she was tired. It showed in her face. Her smiles were seldom. Dark rings beneath her eyes; lines crept from their corners. Her figure spread in the hips, thick ankles and wrist.

Rhonda remembered that day. It began like many others, with Mary-Alice quietly entered her bedroom.

Wake up little lady it s time for breakfast, May-Alice said. She had centered a kiss on Rhonda s forehead. Run on up to the attic and wake your brothers. She stroked Rhonda s hair, flashed a smile she reserved for Rhonda only.

She sat up, rubbed sleep from her eyes, and gathered herself at the edge of the bed. She walked to the window, inhaled the morning air. The sun was out. The air was still cool. The breeze tickled Rhonda s face. After a moment she left her room, walked down hallway and up the narrow attic stairwell to her brother s room. It smelled like dirty socks. She covered her nose with her hand. She was thankful for being the only girl. She shook Butch s bed and startled him awake. She laughed.

Why you kick my bed skinny Minnie? he asked. He rubbed his eyes with a fist. He scratched his odd shaped head it was long and flat as an iron skillet in the back his hair was thick as virgin wool and balled against his skull in knots.

Quiet flat head for I get mama to run a hot comb through them naps. She laughed again. Edward and Jerome rustled under their sheets. Rhonda raised her voice. Mamma, said it s time for breakfast. She snatched the sheets off Edward and Jerome. Y all better come down for the food get cold. She descended the steps carefully; her hands gripped the rail.

The aroma of fresh cooked bacon, oven baked bread assuaged the kitchen. Mary-Alice stirred a pot over the stove. Sam sat at the table reading his newspaper. He attended school, drove taxi evenings.

Pull up a seat princess mama ll be finish these grits shortly, Mary-Alice said. She kept her eyes on the pot. She word a shapeless pink nightgown, it had become her uniform. It washed against her mahogany skin. Her headscarf wrapped tight around her head, ended in a knot at the nape of her neck.

How s daddy s angel? He kept his eyes on the paper.

Fine.

Silence.

Sam wore a starched white shirt, black slacks Mary-Alice pressed his clothes and black wingtips. He wore his shit tucked in his pants unwrinkled, a black leather belt and chrome buckle.

The sky the sun hadn t risen was washed the kitchen in a dull light. It leaked through the window above the seat. The light highlighted Mary-Alice s weary face, lined like ill-formed pottery.

Her beauty had vanished, relics of it remained, liquid brown eyes, full lips. Rhonda wondered what she must have looked like when she met her father. She thought of the photograph, taken not many years ago, that stood on the living room mantel. Mary-Alice thin and vibrant, her smile was full. Between the woman in the picture and Mary-Alice the mother stretched mysterious darkness.

Rhonda stared at her father. He didn't notice, kept his eyes on the paper. His forearms bore scars knife cuts, at the hands of Mary-Alice. Both deep and shallow knife wounds suffered in defense.

Butch entered the kitchen. He pulled his chair to the counter and didn't say a word. Mary-Alice set his plate in front of him.

Butch what I tell you bout enterin' in a room and not speakin'?' Mary-Alice asked.

Sorry ma. Good mornin' everybody. He bowed his head and prayed over his plate.

Mary-Alice lay a plate in front of Sam. The steam rose from the grits.

Sam you gone fix them boy's blinds this evening? Her voice was calm.

Yes Mary, he said. His sounded annoyed. He set his paper aside and started on his plate.

Mary-Alice returned to the stove and began preparing plates.

Jerome and Edward came down; their voices entered the kitchen before them. They sat at the table and Mary gave them their plates. Sam finished breakfast, Mary-Alice walked him to the door, handed him a lunch.

You ain't gone give me a kiss for you leave?

Sam frowned. He kissed Mary-Alice on her forehead.

Don't forget to fix them blinds this evenin' when you get in. She stood in the doorway.

Sam was on the steps headed for the car. He didn't respond and didn't look back.

When she returned to the kitchen, Jerome and Edward were finishing their last mouthfuls of breakfast. She walked to the sink and ran a tub of dishwater. The boys were silent, the clang of silverware and water filling the dish tub the only sounds.

Ma Butch said. He paused as if he'd forgot his question or lost the courage to ask it. Is daddy a good man?

She stopped. Set a plate on the counter and looked over at Butch. He kept his eyes down on his plate.

Yes. Your daddy's a real good man.

Butch was quiet.

Do you Love daddy?

I love your daddy with all of my heart. Mary said, still unaware of the path of the conversation's path. She pulled the younger boys empty plates from the table and dumped them in the sink.

Ma, why come you always gettin' mad and tryin' to hurt him then?

Mary-Alice was stiff with silence. She stared at Butch, Jerome, Edward. She held a plate in her hand; the water ran in the tub behind her. Coffee brewed. She tried to formulate a response. She couldn't.

Mama don't know, she said, I don't mean to hurt you daddy just happens that way sometimes. Her voice was low, like speaking in church during service.

Mary-Alice's response was confirmation for Rhonda, confirmed what she suspected, that her mother lost control. She wondered if she possessed similar tendencies. Morning passed. The noon heat was hot as an oven, and crept through windows, baked hardwood floors. The kids walked the house in shoes. At night, Mary-Alice sent the boys to their room.

Daddy's ladies gonna wait for him to come home. Mary Alice smiled. She kissed Rhonda on her forehead. She walked to the record player, placed a forty-five on the player. Static, then the sound of Dionne Warwick. She took a seat in the rocking chair. Rhonda watched her pink nightgown rustle in the wind.

Outside, the slam of a metal car doors. Keys jingled behind the front door. Sam entered, his shoulders slumped, eyes murky with fatigue. He walked, staggered, to the couch and dropped down. The pillows swallowed him.

Mary watched him without a word, her hands folded over her chest. She rocked.

Rhonda watched her mother. She watched

You gone get them boy's blinds fixed?

Silence

Butch, I said are you gone look after them blinds?

Rhonda noticed a change in her mother's tone. It's harsh and scratchy like shattered glass on the sidewalk.

I'm tired Mary-Alice. I'll fix 'em in the morning. I don't much feel like doing nothing this evening.

Mary stopped rocking, abrupt, the way a needle would slip from a record. The whites of her eyes had a red tint; the pupils were pitch black like an alley with no lights.

Rhonda was startled. She kept her gaze focused on Mary-Alice.

Rhonda you go on and get in bed now, said Mary-Alice.

Rhonda walked down the hall and removed her nightgown from her dresser drawer and put it on. She kneeled at the foot of her bed and prayed whispers. She climbed into bed and lay with her arms folded across her chest. She was submerged in the blankets; only her head peeked above them. She listened for voices, heard an argument down the hall between Sam and Mary-Alice. Rhonda waited, stock-still, in her bed; she listened. The shrill screech of Mary-Alice and screams from Sam, they echoed down the hall like voices in a cave. Frightened she kept still. Shattered glass against the wall. Rhonda crept from her bed, stood near the door.

Tangled shadows, she saw, against the wall; she heard footsteps creaked against the floor. Rhonda ducked behind her door. Sam whisked past, ascended the steps to the boy's room. Mary-Alice's footsteps trailed in the kitchen. The slam of the knife drawer the clang of loose knives and a familiar sound rang in Rhonda's ears. The sound had startled her from sleep many nights. Mary-Alice whisked past Rhonda's bedroom. Rhonda ran to the door. The long blade glinted in Mary-Alice's hand. She held it tip down.

You dirty bastard, she screamed. She bounded the stairs, three at a time. The steps sounded as if they would give way.

In the room they argued, their voices muffled by the distance. Rhonda crept to the base of the steps.

Sam yelled; Mary-Alice's scream followed. Rhonda rubbed her eyes and look up into the room. The light swung above the room.

They appeared at the head of the steps blurred, tangled. Mary-Alice she was a few inches taller than Sam stabbed down at Sam. He dodged. He caught her arm and struggled with it.

Put the knife down!

I ma kill yo black ass! She bared down on him. They twisted at the head. The light glinted on the blade. Behind them the blinds hung down below the windowsill, bent in places. They twisted at the foot of the steps. He pushed to separate. She fell, tumbled down steps.

A scream lodged in Rhonda's throat.

Mary-Alice caught her head on each step individually.

She stopped at the base of the steps, near Rhonda's foot. She kneeled and raised her head. Blood spread across Rhonda's chest like water in white rags. Tears were in her eyes on her cheeks.

She looked up at Sam. He was quiet. His mouth was agape, his eyes. Rhonda clutched her mother, pulled her head to her chest. Mary-Alice's breath was shallow.

Mama please don't die. Rhonda cradled her mother's head. She rocked.

The blood pooled on Mary-Alice's gown.

Mary-Alice shook, grew rigid, shook again. Eyes opened and closed and then fluttered.

Rhonda felt life exiting her mother with every shallow and struggled breath each one lighter than the one before. Life returned and then faded again like a glimmer of false hope

Mama please don t go you ll be alright I promise mama. She looked up; Sam stood above them stiff as boards he d descended without notice his eyes were blank. She looked down at her Mary-Alice; she pleaded with God.

Daddy help! What I do daddy?

Sam he didn t say a word left the hallway and ran towards the living room. He screamed in the phone.

Yes, now. 308 Perry street. She fell on the knife. His voice sounded panicked. The words came in fragments.

Stay with you mama, he yelled from the living room. He looked down the hall. Tears slid down his cheeks. The boys all three had surrounded their mother. Butch clutched her hand. Edward and Jerome stood at Mary-Alice s feet.

Her eyes opened, fluttered, closed. Breath grew shallow. Rhonda tears fell on Mary-Alice s cheeks. Mary-Alice tried to speak.

Take Rho-rhon-Rhonda, her voice was airy, ta take care or your brothers.

Her head grew limp in Rhonda s arms, her hands in Butch s grasp.

Mam mam. The voice at the window startles Rhonda. Mam, can I help you?

Rhonda stands near the counter. She hasn't experienced the wait. She walks to the counter and pushes her papers across it. The raindrops on the paperwork are dried blotches on the papers. The woman her hands are like worn mitts pulls them. She curls her lips, humph, she says.

Rhonda stands hands on hips.

These are not filled out correctly. She points to a section. You'll have to get a new form and fill out this section again. She points with again; her knuckles are smoothed with black hair and scarred, the hands of a construction worker.

Can you give me a pass to return to the front of the line? She struggles with politeness. I've been waiting in this line all day.

No! Her voice is harsh. You'll have to start right at the end of the line. You think these people, she extends an arm, you think these people care? No. It's not their problem. *You* didn't follow instructions. Start and the end.

Rhonda's shoulders rise with two deep breaths. She clenches her eyes.

Miss I've been waiting in line for two hours and you're telling me I gotta wait another two because I made a one little mistake? You're kiddin'?

Calmness betrays her.

Your waiting is not *my* concern. Either you fill out the application and get to the end of the line, or you don't.

The woman pushes the papers towards Rhonda. Rhonda catches them before they slide from the counter top. She crumbles them and hurls them at the woman s head.

Fifteen

Patches of thick fog stifle vision. They ascend winding hills tires crackling against the road in a white sedan. The headlight glare illuminates inches.

Inside the car, the scent of weed and burned cigar papers. They cough, the passengers; they choke, spit from lowered windows into the bushes, ditches, that line the narrow roads. Red eyed, the foursome, two front seated two rear. The blunt, thick as a pencil burns orange at the tip, waves of smoke seep in the cabin. They cough and choke, the red eyed passengers. Black jeans and Dickie slacks, black oversized t-shirts, gloves, ski masks raised to eyebrow. They wear the uniforms of burglars. Gloved hands gripped around the steering wheel. The car stereo hushed, pistols lay on the occupants thighs, off safety, the chrome sparkles in fragments of light.

We do this shit and be out, the driver says. He inhales twice from the blunt; the smoke fills his brain, swells his cheeks, falls to his throat, burns. His face is black as coal, his eyes yellowed.

We do this shit and be out, the passenger seated behind him says. What you think this is the movies? You ain t runnin shit, we splittin this four ways even last I checked. Y all remind me to never blow no water with this fool before another job. He too paranoid

Yeah, four ways even, a voice adds from the passenger side back seat. His voice is shrill, but somebody s fourth is going on a broad, he says.

He turns his head, front seat passenger side, holds the blunt to his lips between index finger and thumb. Keep my name out yo dental, he says.

I ain t said your name. But if the shoe fits everybody at the crib knows its dinner and a movie with you. That s your new handle dinner and a movie.

Or rent and car note, the rear riverside passenger adds. A spat of laughter. The driver coughs up phlegm. Smokes escapes burned lips. Fogged the car s cabin. They ascend the winding roads up Burnside. They ride twice around the apartment complex. Silence in the cabin. The smoke escapes a lowered window. The pull into the lot, a slow cruise, they find the building. They empty the car walk down a narrow pathway. A lowered cloud limits their vision. They walk towards a lit porch light. The moonlight is weakening. Darkness lingers.

Brass numbers on the door where the porch light glows. They wait outside, the foursome, peeking through a slit in the curtains. Inside a lighted room the shadow of a figure. They crouch silent, pistols in hand. They blend with the bushes. The gray glare of a television illuminates the living room.

Outside, their patience is measured in quick breaths, pounding hearts; not a single word uttered between them, not one sound. They cover fully their faces in masks.

She disappears into the hallway, returns. A thin jacket lies over her arm, a book-sized purse over her shoulder. She picks up a remote, turns the channel. Keys she removes from the counter.

The sound of simultaneous pistols cocking. Their eyes bulge behind masks. The door opens; she steps onto the pathway. Two steps two steps she takes before they trail her, silent as cats, and swift. In one motion the pistol pushes against the back of her neck. A gloved hand covers her mouth.

Not one mutha fuckin sound bitch! The voice a calm whisper, calmness that measures intent. She s rigid as boards. Her breath vanishes, heart pauses. A partner snatches her purse; they walk toward the apartment, a pair of them holding her arms wrenched behind her back, the pistol pressed against her temple. They search her purse for keys, try two keys before the door opens. A gray light in the apartment, a muted television.

Outside they turn her; briskly they escort her towards the car. Tears swell her eyes, fall behind her blindfold, down her cheeks, her neck. Her arms shake, her legs, they re weak as infant steps. Her head is yanked back her ponytail.

Cool air chills her face; she looses the grip on her coat; it falls to the damp concrete. They enter the car. Start the engine, reverses out of the parking spot. In the back seat they crowd, no space between them. A hand grips her thigh; the gun is lowered to neck level. The car pulls slow from the parking lot. Mist outside, the sound of birds awakening.

Please don t kill me, she says.

Unless you want a bullet in your head bitch shut the fuck up. He squeezes her thigh, gouges the barrel into her neck.

Inside the apartment, movements guided by the television's pale glare. Huge, the television swallows a full corner, the speakers lean and tall beside it. Leather couches, love seat, glass tables, complete the room. Sega player on the floor, wires tangled, games scattered about.

Down the hallway they walk; they enter the room, click on the light. Rob lies asleep on the bed, fully clothed, shoes dumped on the floor in front of him.

They walk to him, one leans over, bangs his forehead with the butt of the gun.

Wake up bitch! A slap.

Rob snaps up, bangs his head against the headboard.

Melissa what the fuck Rob's hand covers his head. He squares his eyes on the barrel centered on his nose.

They don't speak. Their lone movement the subtle rise of their chests beneath their black shirts.

Ahh shit, what the fuck, he says. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, blood slides from his palm. The gunman's yolk colored eyes is all he can see.

Shut up nigga, a gunman says. His lips show through the mask's mouth opening lips split, red, cracked. He bangs Rob in the head with the pistol's handle. Rob covers, with both hands, where the blow landed.

Ahh shit what y all want?

Another blow, opposite side. Rob screams.

Shut up bitch, we askin the questions. You got the tape? he asks his partner.

Yeah,

Wrap em.

Arms first, then ankles, are surrounded several times, tight as a noose.

You one of them niggas like takin shit don t belong to you huh? the gunman asks.

I don t know what you talkin bout bro. I ain t took nothin from nobody,
Another blow centered on Rob s forehead.

Wrong answer.

All right what y all talkin bout?

Yo let me see this nigga s hands.

His partner pulls out a Rob s hand and presses it flat against the mattress.
Yells at him to hold it in place. The gunman pushes the pistol into it.

Now I ma ask you one more time: you take somethin don t belong to you?

Yeah man yeah. Who you talkin bout.

Who?

I don t know, I could be a couple of cats, but I ll do get it back to them, or
whatever just don kill me bro. Rob s voice cracked.

Don t know what we talkin bout huh? Look like we got us a regular jack
artist here, he pauses, I hate Jackers.

He pushes the gun tip in Rob's hand, shoots. Gunfire partially muffles in the mattress.

Damn damn, what y'all want?

Rob's hand dangles, trembles at his side, drips blood on the bedspread. He bites his lip, clamps his eyes, takes in a deep breath.

Next question. Where's it at?

What?

The second gunman walks to the closet, slides it open. There are rows of jeans pressed, heavily starched. They hang in two's. On the shelf boxes of tennis shoes, stacked three high, on the floor rows of boots. In the back of the closet near the wall a safe covered by a blanket.

Safe.

The gunman slaps the butt of the pistol across Rob's nose, cutting him just above his bridge. That's what. Keep play stupid if you want to boss, and you ain't gone never see that pretty bitch just left here.

The second gunman throws boxes onto the floor now, clearing a path to slide out the safe. He pulls it in front of the bed.

Guess you musta missed the part about not keeping your money where you lay your head? The gunman says, Key and combo?

Rob sits silent for a moment his neck rocking back and forth, blood pooling below his hand, leaking from his nose into the crease of his lips, down the sides of

his face behind his ear. He swallows hard, clenches his eyes. He opens them; they focus on the tattooed letters on the gunman's arm.

Come on bro it's all I got.

Oh, this nigga think we playin' games in here, he says. He gestures at his partner who pulls out Rob's left hand presses it flat against the comforter palm down. The bullet rips through clean.

Ah fuck. Aight aight. Key's in the drawer over there, the middle one on the top, Rob says. His eyes swell with tears.

The second gunman walks to the drawer, throws out bundles of socks until he uncovers a key. He kneels near the safe, inserts the key.

A long pause. All three men stare at the safe, Rob's breath grows shallow with pain. His vision blurred from tears and blood.

Combo?

Twen twenty f-f-four ah seventeen ah ah six. The words stammer out. The gunman turns the safe's knob. A click, a key turn; he pulls the door open. Inside stacks of money bundled in rubberbands, a brown paper sack rolled down the edges.

He got a nice stash, the second gunman says removing the contents.

Of other people's shit, the gunman says. He moves around the bed for a closer look. The second gunman throws the bundles on the bed in front of Rob; he tosses the bag on top of the money.

I told you I don't like Jack artist, but if you give it to us it ain't jackin'. It's friends helping friends out. His lips twist into a smirk.

Have that shit. Just don't kill me.

The second gunman peeks at his watch. We got three minutes, he says. He fills with money, a brown paper sack and his pockets.

Rob eyes the gun.

The gunman grabs a pillow.

You want a stripe today? he asks the second gunman, who's stuffing the last stacks of cash in his pockets.

Handle it, he says.

Lowered, Rob's eyes, an expression of resignation. He doesn't speak. His eyes water; the tears won't come. The gunman covers Rob's face with two pillows, pushes the barrel deep in the pillows, shoots into the side of his head. The sound muffles.

Sixteen

How much is enough? It s a question he s asked himself on many occasions. He promised Kymm in the early stages that ten thousand was the number, but that figure had been reached, passed, doubled, tripled. He chose twenty thousand when he knew he d had thirty. He ceased choosing numbers to stop. He ceased thinking about quitting. He knows there s no magical figure, no finish line where he can quit and come away victorious.

He knows if he doesn t quit he has two options, two options only: death, prison. Still, an irresistible force, money, propels him against better judgement.

He s beyond simple sustenance, escalated to greed. He can t fathom the end. Much too easy the money comes, effortless.

He awakes from sleep, his movements subtle so he doesn t disturb Kymm. Her face is placid, the sleep of babies. He realizes she s his best decision.

Noon, a dull persistent sunlight wriggles through the venetian blinds. Champ walks, shirtless, to the sliding glass doors that open onto the balcony, takes in the city s steady drone, the cool breeze massages his stiffened neck, his lower back. He stretches, returns inside.

In the bathroom, he opens the medicine cabinet pours, in his hand, two vitamins, swallows them with a handful of faucet water. He s startled by his reflection, replaced conspicuously by the face of a stranger, aloof, barren eyes, mouth downturned. Vanished, his innocence, replace by the countenance of a man

with regrets, of a man who lives against his conscience, judgement, a man who trades in all for his sanity.

Kymm lies awake when he returns to the room, sits against the headboard, watches a muted television. Champ enters.

Why you moving so fast baby?

Champ gathers his thoughts, tries to clam his nerves.

Excited to see you. He s unconvincing. He s decided against revealing what he s discovered; her chastisement at the moment, is more than he can bear.

Yeah, OK, She s skeptical, half smiles; wisps of bangs fall over her eyes, But you know I know better than that.

Baby, he says sitting at the edge of the bed. When you look at me what you see?

Kymm stares at him perplexed.

I mean do you think I ve changed? You think this shit is changing me? Tell me the truth.

You want the truth, the truth is: how can this not change you? Remember what you told me when you started? You said you needed to make a few dollars, cause you didn t have a job. Then what? That changed to OK baby, when I get to ten thousand I m quitting. Then you stop saying anything.

Champ sits at the edge of the bed. His walls are crumbling.

It s like you can t quit now, she says, You ve got all this money, all this stuff, and I still never hear you talk about quitting anymore. You never mention it period.

Champ stare blankly.

She continues, I like this material stuff, but I love you, and sometimes I m afraid, afraid one of these nights you ll get caught, one of these nights you ll leave here and I won t ever see you again alive.

Champ walks toward his Chester drawer. He s doesn t need clothes he needs distance now, from Kymm, from his thoughts, the truth. Kymm speaks a truth that crumbles his lies, his foundation.

Hour later he taps the button of his alarm, which starts the Lexus, unlocks the driver s side door. He calls Bump from his cell.

You ready?

Just about. Should be in a few minutes. How far you away?

Just leaving my crib. I ll hunk when I m outside.

Champ pulls out of the parking lot, drives down M.L.K at a crawl. He thinks back to high school, when the hustlers, pimps, dealers cruised down the same street, in polished new cars, chrome rims, blaring sound systems. In those days he walked or caught the bus.

When he purchased the Lexus, he purposely drove main streets, flaunted his status, wealth. But even that ostentatious display of wealth had lost its appeal. The

more money he made the less he valued his material items. It wasn't a cycle with good days and bad days of which when the bad days came he knew good ones were sure to follow.

No, it was more like a steady slide in which after a bad day, he laments another equal or worse day would follow. He was learning a slow costly lesson: happiness based on material things worldly possessions is an illusion.

He pulls into the parking lot of Bump's apartments, taps twice his horn. He waits eyes focused on Bump's door. It doesn't open. He lays on the horn, waits a few more seconds, dials Bump's number.

. What up? Clouds of weed smoke escape Bump's mouth.

What you mean what up? I been out hear laying on the horn while you playing dead.

Yeah, I thought I heard something, Bump says, pausing while he takes in another long pull, I was just trying to finish my morning joint before you came. I know how you be tryin' to time me, I figured you wouldn't be here for a few more minutes. Hold up a sec. I'm on the ass end of my J.

The importance of Bump's morning smokes. Elevated above teeth brushing, showering, eating. Performed without a thought. Champ has long since given up protesting; there were a lot worse things his friend could do. Bump took a last pull, obliterating the end of the joint to the length of a fingernail.

He deposits it in his pocket, enters the car. They pull out; Champ lowers the music to a whisper. There s an extended silence, uncomfortable, like friends passing in hallway without a word.

A slick street, the rain streams down the windshield, is erased by blades. They stop at a light. Crackhead wanders past, coat-less, rain drenching her long sleeved shirt, jeans swallowing skeletal legs; she had the walk of a drunken runway model. Pitiful, her best days are memories.

Look at her, Champ says. He shakes his head glances at Bump.

What about her?

She s out here in the rain without a coat, hat, nothing.

She smokes. What you expect? Clucks ain t worried bout no coat.

Repulse swells in Champ, not for her, but for himself. Unprecedented repulsion.

I know what she is bro, but don t that shit bother you? She probably got kids, and look how that shit got her out here. Don t that shit bother you, that we fuckin people s lives up like this? What if that was your mom?

They watch the woman the take a few steps, stop in the middle of the cross walk and search object in the center of the street. A car skids in front of her, honks loud. She doesn t flinch. Champ cruised through the green slack.

That *is* my mom. Your mom too. It s the way is bro. We ain t invent this shit and we ain t bringin none of it over on no planes. You think the fool that sell dope to your mamma, heroin to my mama give a fuck about us?

Abruptly, down a side street Champ turns, speeding, tires tearing against the slick pavement. He takes a few sharp turns. Ahead the woman walks, her head shakes noticeably with each step.

What you doin ? Bump says, as they slow to a cruise beside the woman. He rolls down his window; she doesn't acknowledge them.

Vikki, he yells.

The woman speeds her walk to a near jog.

Vikki, what you runnin for? It's me Shantae, Rhonda's son?

Vikki stops mid-stride, turns her neck slowly, sees Champ, cracks a forced smile approaching the car.

Tae, baby is that you? Her lips look as if they've been pressed in flower; she's missing one front tooth, You so grown now. She takes a step back, looks over the car like she's considering a purchase. And you doing good too. Why don't you do your aunt Vikki a favor and let her hold twenty dollars. I'll get it back to you next time I see you. I need to grab something to eat, and get me some cigarettes.

Champ looks down at her feet, she's wearing sandals, toes speckled with remnants of black polish.

And can you drop me off over there on fifteenth? I need to stop by my friend's house?

You mean the house on fifteenth and church? The gray house right there on the corner?

Vikki moves like an infant who hasn't yet learned the art of coordination. All her movements are sudden, unplanned. The rain falls on her head.

Yeah, right there on the corner, she says, how you know?

Cause that's my spot, Champ says, pushing the button that unlocks the door, Get in, we'll go get something to eat.

Vikki enters the car. Her clothes smell like wet mops left in a bucket; they squeak against the leather seat.

You trippin', Bump says softly. He raises the music, leans back in his seat.

Champ pulls away from the hotel lot. In his mirror Vikki enters a second floor room, three large bags in hand. A long silence lingers.

What was all that for? Bump asks.

That was my mom's best friend, She helped raise me.

The same best friend got your mom started smokin'? And you gonna buy her clothes, food, and give her some bread? I'm not understandin' that shit bro. She fucked up your mama and you helping her out? If I see the muthafucka got my mama started on that shit I'm whippin' they ass. They be lucky if I don't put a bullet in 'em.

Champ turns down a back street. Abruptly, he pulls to the curb. He maintains hold of the wheel with both hands.

That's the difference between me and you bro, I'm not trying to let this stuff become me. That woman got a problem, just like my mama got a problem, your

mama got a problem, and we just contributing. This shit has gotta stop somehow.

Man every time I give you or some other cat some dope to sell, somebody s kid is going hungry, or ain t got no school clothes, or living in a crib with no heat or lights cause we ridden around in a muthafuckin Lexus, wear Jordan s and Rolie s and shit like we rich.

Champ looks out the window. Bump fidgets in his pockets, shifts in his seat.

What the fuck else I m gonna do? I ain t you bro, I ain t got no college degree, no education. I ain t even got a fuckin high school diploma that s the difference tween us.

It has to be something other than this. What we here for? What s our purpose? I know it ain t sellin no crack to the people we been around all our lives.

Purpose? Bro, I m here to get this cheese and that s what I m gonna do til I m in the dirt.

Champ looks at Bump. I m done bro. I m through with this shit. I got a baby on the way. I can t do it. Soon as I get this degree I m out. You can have this shit bro, clientele and all. I can t do it no more.

Seventeen

Mister stands beside his brother, behind the counter, at the store. He flashes a smile; his bald head gleams under the store lights.

No. Thank you Mrs. Cain, he says to an elderly woman leaving the store, SC can you help Mrs. Cain to her car? See you later pretty lady, he says.

Champ studies Mister's movements, expressions; he listens to the tone of his voice. A kind father he could be, but he knows better. Mister is wearing a mask, playing his role, the performance convincing. Sometimes he wonders if Mister's good character is an act. These thoughts exit quick as they enter, behind the warm smile, warm words, warm handshakes, is the city's most notorious baller. Champ sees more of himself than he'd like to see in Mister.

Champ stands in line behind two school-aged boys. They approach the counter, dollar bills and Snickers in one hand, pop cans in the other. Backpacks are slung over their shoulders. They're glancing over the ten-cent candy on the counter, calculating out loud.

How you young men doing today? He asks, looking at his watch, gold Rolex, diamond studied on band and bezel, Little early for you guys to be outta School, ain't it?

The boys smile. We had early dismissal, they say in chorus. They lay their items on the counter along with their dollar bills.

Where y'all brother at? Mister asks.

Aw, he at home, one of the boys says. He pulls his backpack over his shoulder. He fake like he sick today cause he had a test, the other brother adds.

Mister slides them their candy, pop, returns their money. Here. You guys keep your money and pick out some of them ten-cent candies you been miscalculatin on. And tell your brother what I did for y all, and he coulda got the same if he wasn t so *sick*.

The boys grab a handful of ten-cent candies, stuff their pockets, remove their Snickers and pops from the counter. Thanks Mister, they say, heading for the exit, Thank you. Just outside the door they burst into a full sprint.

Champ approaches the counter; he s figuring a way to ask; the words won t come. A moment of awkward silence between them. Mister s facetious smile vanishes; Champ avoids his eyes. The air is thick, the tension visible as smoke.

What can I do for you brotha , he asks, he grins.

SC enters the store; quiet, his hard-soled shoes, gators, against tile the solitary sound; he walks behind the counter, glares at Champ. He s a man of one expression, grave, Champ wonders if he s capable of another.

I need to holla at you, Champ says.

Watch the counter for me SC,

SC nods; he rarely speaks; he moves behind the register. Champ follows Mister behind the counter, down a dark staircase, his stomach heavy as bricks.

How come SC never say nothin ?

Been like that since we was young, Mister says, When he do say somethin he mean it.

Mister walks into a small room, an overhead light swings; he clicks it on. A scarred bistro table is scattered with dominoes. Champ sits at a stool. Mister peers out of a ground-level window, the light sneaks in; his back is to Champ; his arms are folded.

What can I do for you Champ?

A long silence. Champ arranges the dominoes; he s still unsure where to begin. He s afraid to anger Mister, arouse his suspicion. Mister senses the uneasiness.

I ever tell you bout SC? He asks, his back turned, his arms folded.

Nothin but his name.

My brother may be the only man on the street with two murder beefs on his record, Mister says, and I don t know how many people he s put to sleep.

Champ feels a chill in him; he tries to shake it off, keep a semblance of faux calmness.

You know how he got his first beef?

Quiet.

He d already been down twice when I d got into it with some cats from around my way. They was plannin to rob me, but fucked around and let one of my girls catch wind. When the shit came out, I went to the cat s house with my pistol. I confronted him, put the pistol to his head, and couldn t shoot. SC smoked him right

there on the porch in front of his mama. Mister turns and walks over to the table.

Only thing he ever said about that shit was if anybody even talk bout taking somethin from you put them to sleep.

Champ swallowed hard, from relief, fright. I m not no murderer, he says low.

I know you ain t Champ, that s why I had it handled myself. I knew you didn t have the heart, or you had too much of a heart. But when he took from you, they took from me, and don t nobody take from me and live.

Champ is completely silent, silent and still.

I know you ain t a lifer in this shit, but as long as you doin it, you got to do it right. Mister says.

Eighteen

Friday. Another payday, Rhonda quickly finds a place in line at the check-cashing store. Her faded blue Taco Fever uniform hangs loosely around her thin frame. Fresh stains cover older stains still visible despite several washings. She fidgets, tries to eliminate any negative thoughts, but the more she tries to escape them, the stronger they persist. She knows there isn't any money to spare; there never is. Three hundred and twelve dollars two weeks pay just enough for rent the light bill with a few dollars left for groceries.

She scans the office trying to suppress a steady whirl of anxiety twisting the pit of her stomach. She hopes the store's patrons won't notice the increasingly harsh trembling of her hands, the persistent twitching of her left eye. Her feet throb, swollen from a full day of standing. The smell of ground beef is ground in her clothing. She considers her options, or in reality her one option Champ.

Maybe she needs him. He could help with the money. But calling him now, even though it seems the best alternative, means admitting she's weak again. Besides, what will she tell him? She needs an escort to cash her check, pay the bills, because without one, the bills won't get paid. The thought of telling him she can't fathom, can't bear his disappointment; better she surmises to risk a secret relapse.

A stumpy Hispanic man stands at the counter in front of her, his poor English irritating the woman behind the thick bulletproof glass. Rhonda busies her attention on the Western Union sign that hangs croquet against a wall. Rhonda glimpses the

entrance of two customers, man and woman, in the cracked security mirror. She judges from their rumpled clothes and wild hair, that they re in the midst of an extended binge. She keeps her back to them, hopes they won t recognize her. They re engrossed, luckily, in a conversation between themselves.

We re gonna cash this and go see Hype, the man says standing a few feet behind Rhonda. His voice is familiar Ricky. She shudders.

Whatever, Ricky s female partner says, Just remember we splittin this. We got enough for us both to get a sixteenth. . I m the one who hit the lick for us in the first place.

She feels their eyes on her back, keeps her gaze averted, waits impatiently for her turn at the window. Customers trickle in. Rhonda scrutinizes them all through the mirror.

The Hispanic man, belt cinched around his waist, is attempting, with wild gestures, an unsuccessful conversation counter-woman. Her co-worker, thin frame, lemon sized breasts ignores the fidgeting customers; she reads a paperback, removes her eyes only to sip from her coke.

The Hispanic man, frustrated, snatches his check from the slit beneath the glass, storms out cursing.

Rhonda edges towards the counter, removes the check from her pocket.

You d think if they re gonna stay in our country the least they could do is learn our damn language.

Rhonda signs the back of the check, slides it under the glass. The counter-woman snatches it, asks for identification. Rhonda fumbles through her pockets, pulls out her ID, offers it. On the check, the counter-woman scribbles numbers.

How you want it? She slides the check between a stamping device.

Big.

Big bills she believes are safer, less risky than the twenties, tens, fives, that lull her into a false security, security that makes her think she can smoke just a few dollars not every penny; as if stopping is a realistic option once she begins.

Fifty, one hundred fifty, two hundred fifty, seventy, ninety, one, two, three dollars and twelve cents, the counter-woman counts out. She double-checks, carefully separates each crisp bill.

Rhonda snaps up the money, stuffs it in her pants pocket, and quickly skirts towards the door. She glances up, glances at Ricky briefly, but hurries out before he can speak. Outside, she stuffs the money inside her bra.

Emptied, the sky, of light. The air smells of rain. Rhonda ambles along the sidewalk, frail legs chopping against the subtle breeze, hoping to reach the apartment before the rain begins. Un-hooded her jacket, and thin. She turns off the main street down a narrow alley, a shortcut home. She'll rest she decides before grocery shopping. Everywhere she aches; chest, legs, feet. She'll pay bills Saturday. She kicks a glass bottle into an unfenced yard, just as a single flickering headlight glares against her back.

Rhonda, a male voice yells from the car barely audible above the sputtering engine. Brisk, the pace she maintains, while she pretends not to hear.

Rhonda, the voice calls louder. The car pulls close beside her. Yo, Rhonda it s me Ricky. Wasn t that you comin out the check cashin store? Need a ride?

She stops. No I m fine Ricky. I don t need no ride, thank you.

Don t be silly girl. You look tired. What you just gettin off work? Let me give you a ride ain t no problem.

Black, the car s interior, save the glowing eyes of its occupants. The glow is painfully familiar.

Ricky I said no thank you. I don t need or want a ride. Why you so interested in givin me a ride anyway? I m ain t gettin high.

Ricky slams the breaks. Rhonda turns and walks away.

Rhonda, he yells, Why the hell you always got to bad mouth somebody? You don t wanna smoke? I ain t said a goddam thing bout smokin . Hey! Quit walkin away from me when I m talkin .

Rhonda turns her body first then neck, thoroughly irritated. She recalls the last few times she s encountered Ricky.

Please let me be?

The rain begins, light as first, harsher seconds later. The drops beat down like fist. She thinks of her walk home a walk she now dreads.

Look? It s pourin now, his voice has softened, I know you don t wanna walk home in this shit. Quit trippin. Come on and get in. You ain t got no hood or no umbrella.

Rhonda s canvas sneakers absorb rain like towels; heels sink in her damp insoles.

Take me straight home. Drop me off in the parking lot.

Visible, a triumphant smirk across Ricky s face as Rhonda walks towards the car. Down the alley the sputter.

Ricky stops, flicks on the roof light. We just got to make one stop. He says and studies her face in the rear view mirror.

Saturday night. Champ pulls into the parking lot circles twice in search of a safe spot for the Lexus.

It s packed, Bump says, straightening the bandana around his freshly braided cornrows.

Champ maneuvers between two cars, kills the engine. Stash the burner, he says.

Bump hides a chrome pistol under the seat. They walk towards the club straightening, brushing, looking themselves over. Bump is swallowed in a pair of oversized Khakis. Gold Timberland boots; a long sleeved t-shirt, navel length gold medallion complete the outfit. Champ wears Prada boots squared at the toe, jeans, a button-down silk shirt. Bejeweled his neck, pinkie, and wrist.

The blare of music shakes the windows. Blatant stares they receive Bump and Champ upon entrance. They wade through the crowd, towards the bar. Champ orders a Hennessy, coke chased; Bump a double the Hennessy, chased with water.

Heavy fog fills the room. Loud chatter rings everywhere: the clang of glasses, the thud of base, buzzing conversations. Champ sifts through the crowd dispersing the mandatory handshakes, hugs, nods.

The scene unfolds to Champ like theater, only now he's aware. He greets everyone as friends, all with the smile of familiarity, but feels somehow as if he's outside himself watching. He cuts through the dance floor, finds an empty table against a wall, sips coolly, his drink.

Across the room an errant eye summons his attention. She saunters across the room, smiles when she reaches Champ. He leans, whispers: How you doin' beautiful?

A smile.

Fine

What's your name?

Raven.

Very nice to meet you Raven. He extends his hand. I'm Champ.

The lights glint against his jewels.

You from round here?

Just moved up here from Texas.

Figured that, he says, I don't forget pretty faces and I ain't seen yours. I'd definitely remember yours.

You trying to flatter me Champ?

Champ smiles, admires her Southern drawl, her features. He skin is flawless, almond shaped eyes mesmerizing brown, her legs thin as sticks.

I like your style Champ. She looks him over. Different not like the rest of the brothers I've seen up here.

Thanks.

He sips more from habit than necessity.

You empty handed or just ain't drinkin'?

She waits for a moment, like she's paying careful attention to her responses. Just finished one. So I guess that makes me empty handed.

Well, drinks on me the rest of the night. A pretty lady like you shouldn't be empty handed if she don't wanna be. Here have my seat. What you sippin' on?

Sex on the Beach, she says sultry and smiles.

Champ heads for the bar; guilt strikes in the time it takes to reach the counter. He thinks of Kymm; he needs to hear her voice. He orders the drink, walks back across the room.

Here you go. The attraction in his voice has vanished. Can you hold tight for a minute? I gotta make a call.

Raven's face looks puzzled. Champ walks towards the far end of the club, whispers in Bump's ear.

Two-fifteen the Rolex reads. He dials home, hears three rings before Kymm answers.

Hello.

Hey baby.

Champ why you calling this late? I thought you were at the club?

I am at the club outside really. I was just thinkin bout you.

Silence.

I was just thinkin bout how much I love you that s all and I wanted to tell you.

What d you do? You must ve done somethin wrong?

No. I haven t. I just wanted to tell you that. Now go back to sleep. I ll be home in bout an hour. I gotta drop Bump off.

He calls his m other, counts seven rings, then hangs—up. The second call yields ten unanswered rings. He pages Bump, leaves an urgent page.

Hey bro I m ready.

Ready for what? Thought you was just goin to car for a minute?

I was, but I m ready now.

What s the deal?

I just called my mom s apartment and she ain t answer. I ma run by and check on her. You can stay if you want, but you gotta find your own way home.

All right bro. I ma hold tight. Moved a little piece of work.

Cool. I ll holla tomorrow.

Hey bro don t forget about the burner. Let me know what s up with moms.

Along ill-lighted streets, Rhonda stumbles, the pants cuff of her Taco fever fallen loose and dragging beneath a pair of oversized men s sneakers. She clutches a her purse, completely empty. Her pockets are empty save her apartment key. Recuperation she needs, time to pick up the fragments.

She hates Ricky, hates him for exploiting her weaknesses, knows if it weren t for him she d be home, not walking home asleep not awake. Most importantly she wouldn t be trying to shake *another* high. Still she can t help but despise her weakness, her vulnerability. But despising it won t change the last two days. Nothing will return the wasted dollars, sizzled against the mesh screen, up in smoke.

The tennis shoes weight her feet like blocks of cement. Sharp pains pierce her empty stomach. But nothing compares with the smell, the stench of that clings to her clothes, sinks in her skin.

Eight more blocks she thinks her shoes flopping, arms folded feebly against the night air, purse underarm eight more blocks and she can forget this happened again.

Car approaches from the rear, illuminates Rhonda s path . She stumbles in a sidewalk crack. Flanked by the slow moving car, Rhonda refuses to acknowledge it, keeps her head straight.

Mama mama,

She speeds her gait.

Mama stop! What the hell you doin' ?

She's paralyzed in mid-stride.

Get in.

They ride in silence, infiltrated only by the steady hum of engine, the faint whisper of exaggerated breaths.

Please Champ, just take me home? Her eyes are fixed outside of the window.

Please just take me home? I don't wanna talk right now. I just need to get home. Rancid, she smells of old food, stale smoke. Champ lowers all his windows.

He pulls in the parking lot, parks the car, stares at Rhonda in faint light, her cheeks gaunt, arms like sticks. He watches her exit barefooted, and disappear beyond the fence without a word. He waits a moment, then pulls off.

Rhonda trudges into the apartment, heads straight to the bathroom. In the mirror she inspects, which amounts to self-imposed punishment. Wild hair, cracked red lips, chipped fingernails pipe burns blacken her fingers. The tears well up, but won't fall. Could Champ see all this in the darkness she wonders? A sharp pain stabs her stomach, reminds Rhonda of her hunger. She walks to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator. Inside, a gallon curdled milk, a half loaf of molded bread. A fiercer pain stabs her stomach.

Nineteen

Glistening, the sky blue paint like ocean water at daybreak, the chrome rims whirling like roulettes, separated from the pavement by thin rubber. He owns the road and drives as such, steers centered in it, rolls through stop signs, speeds down back streets. Like a child, his head is barely visible above the steering wheel, leaning, seat reclined.

The base thunders from his trunk everywhere, shakes windows of cars lined along the street, and further back beyond the cracked pavement, the windows of homes — paint cracking and peeling from their exteriors, porches sunken and battered by weather; interior carpets soiled, ceilings where rain falls through.

Speakers leak treble through an open window. He nods his head; he mouths the words in unison. The world — back streets, gambling shacks, after hours clubs — is his. He pulls into the parking lot of the apartments, parks recklessly across two parking spaces. He stashes his gun under the seat.

Littered, the parking lot, with garbage; litter that feels necessary, has become part of the scenery. A Volkswagen raised on bricks, rusted bumper, in an adjacent parking space, a man's legs protruding from beneath. Bump walks the pathway to the apartment. Music blares behind the door. He knocks, waits. A second knock, more waiting. The door is flung open, behind it, a young man towering, shirt off, muscles flexing like an athlete's, it seems, without thought.

A long pause. Bump looking upward, mouth down turned; he stares back, stands in the threshold of the door unmoved.

What, he says finally. His voice is deep; his arms are like chopped logs.

I ain't here to see yo' black ass. I come by here to get my daughter.

Bump walks past him; his shoulder brushes a protruding elbow. He mumbles under his breath, only he hears.

Where's my daughter? He asks, walking towards the living room.

Myasha, where you at girl? Your daddy's here.

She runs — stumbling slightly on a shoe — pig tails brushing her shoulders; she wears jeans, a white T-shirt, she has a beautiful smile, broken, one front tooth is missing. Alone she holds the power to erase Bump's perpetual grimace.

Daddy, daddy, she says. Her arms are extended. He raises her toward the ceiling, kisses her cheek, inspects her clothes. Her shirt is camouflaged with stains.

Behind him, circling like a hunter, he walks towards the stairs. He dutifully ignores the rising tension between them. He tosses her in the air twice.

Why y'all got my little girl in these filthy ass clothes, he says, baby where your mama at? He watches with one eye, not fearful, but suspicious.

Upstairs, she says.

Ruby, Bump yells, bring yo' triflin' ass down here.

What little respect he held for her has evaporated over the years. His tongue could be worse if not for Myasha. A little boy grabs at his loose jeans; Bump rubs his head.

What s up little man, you been being good, looking out for your sister? He asks.

The boy smiles, his gap wide as fork spaces.

Yeah, Bump, he says. He extends his hand. Bump pulls a few dollars from his pocket, folds them, and hands them to him. He runs toward the stairs screaming for his mother.

Baby, this little young fool down here looking for you, he says.

Bump ignores, kisses Myasha once more on the cheek, stands her on her feet.

Where you want to go today baby, how bout the mall, daddy get you some new clothes, you like that?

Yes daddy, she says, flashing again, her gaping smile.

He sits her down, run upstairs and get your mama, he says, Ruby, he yells again. He watches her run up the steps.

Yo', quit yelling in my crib, he says. He sits on the couch, mutes the stereo, watches uninterested the television.

This ain t your crib, Bump says sarcastically, this is the state s crib nigga don t forget it. You and that broke bitch can t afford no regular rent.

He stands, walks towards Bump, who watches him intently — the swing in his arms, the weight of his step on the stained carpet he doesn t move.

Watch your mouth about my woman little ass punk, for I put hands on you! He says.

It's there, the flash in Bump's eye, pounding heart, the blood moves through him feverish, swells like tides in high rain. In other moments these sensations, would excite violence. He walks towards him, fist clenched, teeth tight as hunting traps.

She's community property fool, you living with five kids, ain't none of them yours. And I got yo'muthafuckin punk too! His words don't match his growing anger; they fall short; the distance between them shortens, tension compresses.

Down the steps, Myasha returns, tugging at the sleeve of her mother's robe. The crack reveals her naked stomach, stretch marks covering her belly like roads on a map. Bump is disgusted, abhors the time he found her attractive. Three years have passed between them, three children, Myasha and two others with different dads. Bump shakes his head disgustingly.

Four years, four children, forty pounds ago, they'd met, by chance, at a mutual friend's apartment. Bump was eighteen then, fresh from his last bid in juvenile detention. He was young and brash. She was twenty-six, one baby then, no baby's father around. Her lips were full. Her hair hung to mid-back. The first day she teased him, and the second, the third she showed him things he'd never known.

I know my body, she'd said, after about two months, when she took off the condom. I can't get pregnant.

Three months after that there was a slight bulge in her belly, six months later there was certainty.

Cover that nasty ass belly up, it look like a bowl of noodles,
Bump says. And why is my daughter running around here in these dirty ass
clothes? His voice crackles with anger.

Cause we ain t got no washer, and no money to go the wash house. You
want your daughter in clean clothes — give me some wash money, she says. She is
shameless; she makes no attempt to cover herself.

Bump pulls bills from his pocket two hundred dollar bills crumples them,
throws them at her feet.

You got this lazy broke ass nigga in here. What the hell for? He ain t got no
job, no hustle, he glares across the room, his gaze like fire, You a sorry ass nigga,
he says, then Myasha, come on baby, you don t need nothin daddy gonna get yo
some new clothes, whatever you need.

She runs to him, and they leave, holding hands. Bump stops to adjust his
pants; Myasha skips ahead. He fasteners her into the car.

You been a good girl? He asks.

Yes daddy, cept for when I spilled the cereal on the ground and Weldon
whipped me.

Weldon whipped you? He asks. His voice shrieks.

Yes daddy, he was mad when I spilled the cereal; mama wasn t home.

Bump starts the car, grabs the pistol from under his seat, and shoves it in his
belt line. He straps her in the front seat, You wait right here for a minute while
daddy talks to Weldon, he says.

Along the pathway he cocks his pistol, unlocks the safety. The front door is partially cracked when he enters. Weldon sits on the couch, he doesn't look up.

What you want now? He asks watching the TV without looking up.

Bump dashes behind the couch and locks his forearms around Weldon's neck. He pushes the barrel into Weldon's cheek.

You put your hands on my daughter. Don't you ever in your life put your hands on my daughter again long as you live, nigga unless you want some violence in your life!

Bump epitomizes the beauty of unadulterated, refines it, refuses to relinquish its power. His strength is fortified with anger, he squeezing hard enough to choke life from Weldon. He takes pleasure in watching the color leave Weldon's face, the tension in his arms go limp.

Bump loosens his vice, pushes Weldon forward. He falls, coughs, spits, holds his neck.

Who's the punk now?

He latches the gun's safety, walks towards the door, Ruby come get your *punk* ass boyfriend off the ground! he yells.

Front door to car one hundred paces at most cleanses him, his guilt, his scowl softens, his breath slows.

The engine sounds like a concert of small instruments. A small toothed smile in the distance, and illuminating smile; her head peeks above the window. Her seat belt is unlatched. He opens the door, kisses her cheek.

Weldon ain t gonna whip you no more baby; you tell daddy if he even raise his voice at you you let daddy know, he says, his voiced still excited. He sits behind the wheel, places his gun under the seat, admonishes Myasha to refasten her seatbelt.

The sun is cooler than it looks; its rays barely heat through the windshield. He cruises the neighborhood; in a short time it has awakened; a football game has taken over the street, a group of boys chase a football carrier. His breath is short; his racing heart slows in imperceptible increments. He has lowered the base to vibration, a fragment of volume he knows the music rings her ears he plays music without cursing.

They walk hand in hand through the parking lot into the mall. An expensive department store, they enter, search for the children s section. She points, smiles, pulls clothes from the racks. He tells her she can have as much as she can carry; her arms are full of dresses, pants, shirts he underestimates her strength; it astonishes she labors to the register; her head peeks above the pile. In the shoe section she s allowed five pairs, one for each day, cost is not an issue, only size and quality; she leaves her scuffed sneakers next to a chair. They eat sundaes at an ice cream store; chocolate syrup smudges her lips. They spend hours together hours without thoughts of money, violence, drugs they feel like minutes; he can think on only one thing: her happiness. He purchases her favorite CD; they leave the mall.

He pulls in the parking lot of the small store, walls littered with posters, announcements, pictures, signs. She is asleep in the front seat, her head resting against the door.

Two young boys stand just outside the door, hair in a balled medium length afro, clothes splotched with stains. They look up at him as he passes. Inside he buys two juices, a pop, and two Snickers along with his blunt papers; he pays with a hundred; he leaves the store. In one hand he grips the small paper sack, the other loose bills from his change.

Y all out here by y all selves? he asks. He places the bag on the roof the car; he pats his pockets for the jingle of keys.

Yes. They smile, nudge each other with accidental shoulders. Can we have a dollar?

Broken the silence; he admires their courage.

Bump puts the bag in the car, kissing a sleeping Myasha, walks around to the boys. He pulls two twenty-dollar bills from his store change, hands one each to them. They examine the bills for a moment.

Is this a dollar? the shorter boy asks. He had a brown scar on his forehead.

It s a twenty, his partner says.

Yeah, it s a twenty, Bump says, And don t spend it all on no candy, I ma tell jack to let me know if y all spending all your money on candy, and if you do when I come back I ain t giving y all no more money. What's y all names,

Pookie, Man Man, they say, stumbling over each other.

He s my brother, Pookie says. His tennis shoes are white, stained — Man s
Man s laces are missing.

Bumps rubs their heads, playfully. Y all tyrin to grow some braids, or just
need haircuts, Pook? He has the tendency of shortening all names over two
syllables.

We gettin haircuts, soon as our mamma get her check, Pookie says. He is
a natural spokesperson, yet to master the skill of evasion.

Bump pulls two more twenties from his loose change and hands them to each
of the boys.

Here. You tell your mamma to take y all down to the barbershop and get
y all a fade. If she ask you where you got the money from tell her Bump.

Pookie and Man Man rush the other direction, money in hand, waving in the
air. The duck under the chain the guards the small parking lot, stop.

Thanks Bump! the scream.

The paint gleams beneath the beneath the streetlights. The music is lowered.
Exhausted, she sleeps in the seat, face leaning against the door. He glances at her at
stops; she calls smiles from him, she demands them, unknowingly. He rubs her
head. She briefly opens her eyes, smiles, closes them, an instant of unadulterated
joy, the only joy he knows, the only join has known.

The apartment parking lot is completely dark like a room with no lights, no
windows, at night; all objects appear as shadows. He follows his headlights into an

empty space. He turns off the engine. He taps her, gently, on the shoulder. Wake up baby we re home, he says.

She says nothing; her expression says everything. These moments, he wishes, could be bottled, filmed, lived forever, nothing but them. She is living confirmation that he is not only corruption. Without her, he s death, evading slowly without much effort; it gains quickly; he hopes only to create mayhem, havoc before he s caught. He walks to the passenger side, opens the door. He picks the two bags from the back seat. On his hip, he carries her, bags on his opposite arm down the pathway. He kicks trash aside. I love you, he says low in her ear, Don t you ever forget your daddy loves you Myasha, he says.

She lays her head on his shoulder; her arms are around his neck. She squeezes. At the door he sits the bags on the ground, knocks. No answer immediately, no movement. A second knock produces a stir, barely heard, just behind the door. It opens, behind it the room is lighted only by the gray light of the television. Bump stands in the doorway, backlighted by a malfunctioning porch light, the moon.

Run upstairs and grab your mama, he says.

She rubs her eyes; she starts towards the stairs. Weldon sits slumped on the couch, his head barely visible above it. There is an awful silence, like confessional boxes before a priest enters. An unsteady hand.

Crack! The startling sound of gunfire.

Bullets slash the through the air invisible until impact. The first flashes past like a misguided dart, a second pierces Bump s arm, the third his chest. And that bullet swims to his heart. A fourth bullet pierces his neck; blood spills out like water from a punctured garden hose. Weldon stands over him, the barrel of the pistol pointed at his stomach.

Bump s breath is short; his heart is weak, he hears screams in the background loud at first then softer, like the sound of passing cars on a freeway they are the voices of Myasha, Ruby, Ruby s sons. After a moment the voices grow meshed, tangled, then indistinguishable. The gun sparks, barrel end like a small flame. His body leaps.

He doesn t fight, he has waited for this moment, it seems, for all of his life. He accepts it; breathing slow and shallow, his eyes opening, closing, then opening again. He glimpses Myasha kneeling over him, her small figure blurred, tears streaming down her cheeks. There s blood on her small hands.

Twenty

Evening, the last bit of light in the sky glows the color of dried orange peels; Champ drives through Northeast. He pulls in the lot; a stream of soapy water exits the car. Full meal deal, he yells to Johnny, the car wash owner.

You need to come see me more often, Johnny says. He motions with his hands; they re wrinkled as shriveled grapes.

I know, I been busy, Champ says heading towards a row of chairs lined up against the wall. The loud hum of a vacuum, Johnny s attendants finish a car.

He finds a seat against the wall and removes a textbook from his bag.

Johnny sprays the Lexus, begins soaping with a hand mitt. He opens in the book in his lap, doesn t look up. Inside his pocket, his cell phone vibrates

He checks the number. It s blocked. What up, he answers.

Champ.

Who this?

He dead.

Ruby that you? Who dead? You playin a damn game?

Champ walks away from the seats away from the other patrons.

Bump, he s layin right here. Police on they way. Her voice whispers across the receiver. Champ he dead.

Where you at?

Home.

Champ gathers his book from the chair and runs to the car.

I m on my way.

He hands Johnny twenty dollars, enters the car.

I gotta go.

A layer of suds coats the car.

Least let me finish em on up? Johnny asks.

I gotta go, he says.

He slams the door, peels out of the lot headed west down Freemont. Through red lights he roars, through residential crosswalks. He blares his horn, tailgates, swerves around traffic. Minutes it takes to reach the lot. He skids in, exits his door flings open.

A crowd of people outside. The blaring sound of sirens approaching. Champ sprints through the open fence towards the apartment. A circle of men huddle around they body. His mouth hangs open, breath trapped, he can t exhale. Silent, he approaches. He can t see where the bullets have struck. Bump s drenched in blood. Champ kneels down, raises Bump s head off the concrete, neck limp; his head heavy. Through the open door Champ peers in. Ruby stands, three children around her, Myasha clings to her knee. Her tattered nightgown open, she wears a black bra, white panties. They return his stare, then look up at Ruby. Silent, she covers her face every few seconds with her hands, weeps loudly.

The sound of sirens grows nearer.

Let s get him in the house, a man says.

No! Don't touch him.

These kids don't need to see this.

Champ looks up at the porches, balconies of near-by apartments. Adult, children glare down, stunned faces, tears.

Alright let's get 'em inside. His voice cracks.

They hoist Bump the blood drips down, stain shirts and pants and lay him just inside the apartment.

Send them kids upstairs, Champ yells to Ruby.

She says nothing, can't remove her eyes from Bump's bloodied body.

Y'all go on upstairs.

Startled children run scatter. Myasha stays put, clings to her mother's leg, tears brimming.

A team of officers storm in guns drawn.

Police. Everybody hands up.

Get on the ground now, they shout. The four men lay face down against the stained carpet. Each receives handcuffs.

An officer runs to check on Bump.

We ain't done nothin' Champ blurts out, Ruby tell 'em somethin'

Silence.

Ruby.

An officer approaches Ruby. Mam do you live here?

Ruby shakes her head yes.

Do you know what happened?

He shot him, she mumbles.

Mam. Who shot who?

My boyfriend. Weldon. He shot him. They argued today. He shot him.

Where s Weldon?

The officer yells something over the radio. A static reply.

Ah shit, Champ yells across the room, these cuffs is tight. Yo' we ain t done shit. That s my fuckin brother. Ruby tell em somethin

He walked off. He left walkin . Ruby says softly.

The officer takes a knee to speak with Myasha. Is this your mother?

Yes.

Would you like to go outside and sit in my car?

No. I stay with mommy. She squeezes Ruby s thigh.

Yo'. Can I get these cuffs off? We ain t done shit. Champ yells.

Quiet, the nearest officer orders, you ll get the cuffs off when we say.

A tandem of paramedics rush in, drop a box near Bump s body, check his pulse.

No pulse, one says. He pulls away a bloodied plastic glove.

How long he s been here? another asks.

Call came in 30 minutes ago, says an officer.

Somebody get the coroner.

Champ squirms on the filthy carpet the stench fumes up, insults his smell his eyes fill with tears. The cuffed men remain quiet and still, faces lifted from the carpet, arms wrenched behind their backs.

Seated on the couch, Ruby answers the officer s questions, her voice low and quivering.

One officer he seems the leader orders the men un-cuffed. They answer questions as officers scribble information on slim notepads.

The Lexus crawls along Marine drive, the music muted, windows cracked; the air whistles through. Boat yards, homes, restaurants he passes. The image seared in his mind, of Bump, bloodied, bullet pierced head. In a grassy field, adjacent to the runway, he stops. Planes pass overhead, their engines torture the sky, leave streams of white contrails. Champ s shirt and pants are sullied with blood. He looks down at his them.

He knew it was coming, still the shock is no less significant. In Bump he saw pieces of himself, what he could have been, what he was surely capable of becoming. He wondered what Bump would have done if he were dead? He knows nothing short of retaliation, murder. The streets had raised them both, and the code of the streets demanded no police. There was more to risk, his freedom, fatherhood; but he ll risk it all now, because he knows Bump would do it for him. He exits the Lexus, walks toward the fence. He holds it. The tears stream. Overhead, planes tear

through the sky, contrails like gray flags. He shakes at the fence, hopes better judgement will intervene.

Twenty-one

A thin blanket is virtually useless against the early morning cold in the frigid apartment. Air leaks in un-touched by the sun. Rhonda cocoons herself in the sheets. She tosses, recognizes the futility of attempting sleep, she uncovers, walks to the kitchen. The hardwood floors cool on her feet.

Inside the refrigerator is a carton of milk, a package of sandwich meat. She inspects the date, which is expired. She closes the door, reopens, as if a mysterious stranger would slip in food. Disappointed she grabs two pieces of bread, slaps a piece of sandwich meat between them, takes a forced bite on her way to the bedroom.

She slips on a pair of shoes, removes her money from the dresser, counts it. She stuffs four twenty-dollar bills in her bra. She walks to the closet, puts on the down jacket bought by Champ. She dashes from the apartment.

She can handle the money, she thinks; in reality she s not sure. Stress she needs released. Down the narrow pathway that leads to the front gate she hurries, her breath forming small clouds. I am not having a relapse she whispers silently to herself. She pushes through the gate out in the street. Quiet streets, sparse. The corner dealers have retreated inside.

Her gait quick, she walks with purpose, doesn t want to leave any room for a change of heart, of mind. Down four blocks, chilly, she turns left. Tangled trees form an overhead canopy, hides the moonlight. She voices of her Depaul counselors

replay in her head. She silences the voices, emerges from the canopy of trees, walks toward her destination. In the distance, a block ahead, their figures shadowed under the dim streetlight, a huddle of five men. They pass a single cigarette among them. Rhonda waits, takes in a deep breath summoning strength. A man in the huddle notices her.

Rhonda that you? he asks. A wild crop of hair standing on his head like hardened cotton balls. What was a long sleeve shirt stops in the middle of his forearms, ragged jeans and hang inches above his ankle.

Yes. She glances at his face, skeletal; his features are sunken.

What the hell you doin down here this time of night. There s a shimmer in his eyes.

A pause, painful when Rhonda must confront the truth. He s mocking her pain. She considers fleeing the best option all the way home, but stays

. I came down here, to get a well I m just trying to get a I mean She can t form the sentence; they block her throat like bones.

I was just wondering, he says, sensing her uneasiness, the last time I saw you was on the bus coming from Depaul. I offered to smoke witcha and you was actin all sididty.

I know I know, Rhonda says looking at the circle of men, ashamed of her rising guilt. Look, let s not even talk about it.

Cool, he says inhaling the cigarette. We ll let it go. I mean if you got some ends we can smoke. He steps away, away from the shadows, moving towards

her, and stands. His jaws are sunken, his bone show through like a gaunt runway model. He smiles reveals scattered teeth.

They walk around the back of the apartment along a winding path reminiscent of the Piedmonts, ill lighted, she stumbles over a bottle. They reach the door where a young man stands guard. A blue bandana wraps his head, partially covers his left eye, a blue jacket he wears; oversized his blue jacket, jeans, white t-shirt. He glares.

Is Bear in there? Ricky asks, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Yeah. Why? You puffed all your ends and we ain t got no credit. Raspy, the young man s voice, the rasp of blunt smoke, heavy drinking.

I don t need no credit, he says proudly, *We* got money to spend. You gonna let us in or do we got to spend with somebody else?

The guard steps aside, they enter. Rancid the room s odor, and odor that attacks. On the couch to their left sit four like clones of the doorman. They argue loudly over a video game. They pay Rhonda and Ricky no attention it seems, Bear in the back, one says; he doesn t look up. They walk down to a room door closed, gray flicker of television under the door. Inside Bear s presence consumes a metal table.

Back?

Yeah. And me my people got bread to spend. I brought her to you cause you always take care of me. Ain t that right big Bear?

They battle between them; for the maximum Ricky barter; for the minimum Bear will settle. Bear sits at a small fold up table with his large belly severing as a 12-inch buffer.

What y all spendin ? He s harsh in the feeble light, one that emanates from a lunchbox-sized TV.

Ricky looks at Rhonda. She s dazed and can t answer, in a nightmare she can t escape.

Get us goin with a sixteenth. Ricky says. He nudges aspirin-sized white pills. Face flushed, tongue dry, she can t escape her craving. Sweat slides down her side; She s faint. She removes three twenties from her bra. Bear studies them, stuffs them in his pocket.

We don t make no change, he says harshly. He looks at Ricky Rhonda.

Come on Bear baby? We gon spend wit you boss. Keep the sixty just show us some love. Throw us an extra pill?

She s silent, Rhonda, wants desperately to smoke herself into oblivion. A suspended tear in her eye goes unnoticed in the darkness. He opens the bag, plucks and single pill, tosses it at Ricky. He misses it, drops to his knees, searches feverish.

You can t smoke in here. Take that shit next door to the smoke room

Ricky stands, pill in hand, scatter-toothed smile. They walk to the smoke room. Inside a ripped, filthy couch, flush against a filthy wall, littered with a collage of graffiti. Decrepit sneakers strewn on the floor, a yellow stained sheet hangs as

curtain. The filth Rhonda concedes is part of the package, like the furniture on a play's stage. Ricky rummages pockets, removes an antenna pipe, a lighter.

Eyes fixed on the pipe, she's thankful she doesn't have her own, summarizes somehow she's a better drug addict, or maybe not an addict at all; she wants to get high. This distinct separation, she thinks, she maintains. Behind them Ricky closes the door, walks to the couch. Rhonda joins him, apprehensive, eager. Ricky places a tiny piece crack on the screened end of the pipe, hands it to her

Here. This yo dope, the first hit is you. She holds the pipe in front of her; she's astonished how awkward she feels; slowly draws the lighter over the pill, and flicks.

No spark.

She flicks again; a weak flame extends, holds steady. She puts the pipe to her mouth, clenches her eyes, takes an extended pull.

Two trips home, two hundred dollars later, fogged, cracked lips, eyes stunned, the pain persists undiminished. She's chased that first hit for hours, the way the moon chases the sun. She wants to stop, doesn't have the courage or will. On knees and hands she scours for loose pills, the tiniest sliver of crack. Her fingers are forceps. The white specks infuriate.

You ain't got no more money? Ricky asks. He sits against the wall scraping resin from his pipe.

We spent it all. She tells the truth. Her chest burns, hands tremble, her heart pounds irregular. She keeps secret the fifty-dollar bill in her bra, determined to return home with some money, if only a few dollars.

We gotta see if Bear will give us some credit, Ricky says. He stands, leaning against the wall.

Rhonda averts her gaze, presses together her hands, slides them between her legs. They won't stop shaking. She prays, promises never to smoke again. She curls against the wall, sobs.

I ma holler at Bear, Ricky says. He ignores her crying, leaves the room returns.

Bear says he'll give us five pills, he says excited, all you got to do is take care of him

Silence.

You listenin? He s givin' us five pills free,

She looks up with eyes that wish him dead, smeared mascara, beneath her eyes, running eyeliner. Ricky can't see this in the darkness.

Take care of him? Her voice is low.

Yeah for five pills. Take care of that. You wanna smoke don't you?

She stands back to the window; an outside light creeps in.

I m not taking care of nobody you black bastard. Who the hell you think I am? I ain't no muthafuckin hoe. I m not suckin nobody's dick for no piece of

crack. You wanna keep smokin? You such his dick. Her teeth and fist are clenched.

Exasperated, Ricky stares, mouth open. The anger follows.

What the fuck you mean your not no hoe? Bitch youz a crack head a good for nothin low down dirty crack head. You think you better than everybody? You can t suck no dick? I should slap the shit out you just for talkin to me like that you funky tramp.

He closes in on Rhonda. She retreats in a corner

What the fuck you scared fo bitch? You talkin bad two seconds ago. Inches away, his breath is warm on her face. From fear and habit she slaps him.

You funky bitch, He grabs her neck, chokes chokes with all the strength he can muster she gags. She fights, looses her strength, is completely still.

He releases.

Hours later she s lies in bed, in the cool room. She hopes, prays her relapse was nothing more than a nightmare. She inspects her hands, chipped nails, pipe burns the enduring scars like needle marks of a heroin addict.

She sits at the bed s edge, hands cupped over face, tears between her fingers. Promises a familiar one she won t fall again.

Twenty-two

One week clean, she sits on the couch, in the empty room, fingers methodically dial against better judgement. She counts ten rings and several nervous heartbeats before he answers.

Hello.

Hello.

Chris she says. Her voice is low, shaky.

Rhonda Rhonda that you?

Chris I want to come see the boys.

Silence.

Chris I wanna come see the boys today. Superficial calmness laces her voice like a thin sheet against the cold.

I don't think that's a good idea.

Chris I need to see my boys. Her voice quivers with desperation; she paces the room, settles at the front window. Kids three of them play outside in the grass.

I don't think that's a good idea right now. I mean you haven't been to see them since you just popped up. They need something stable. You can't show up every two months.

Chris, she says, I'd like to come see my sons. I need to see them. I'm not asking you, I'm telling you I need to see my sons.

You can t tell me nothin . The boy s are O.K. and I m tellin you not to come by. Besides I hear you fuckin up again. You ain t even been out that program a good six months, he pauses, What you need to do is work on getting yourself together, then maybe we can make some arrangements.

Arrangements! I don t need no muthafuckin arrangements to see my sons you black bastard.

Rhonda, you re ove rreacting. And to be honest, you re not the one making the decisions.

His calmness triggers a fury; every serene syllable seems purposely antagonizing.

When you get your mind together and you feel like talking rationally then maybe we can work something

Fuck you. Who the fuck you think you are? I m comin to see my sons. Those are my boys! She flings her cordless phone against the wall, watches unfazed as it shatters in pieces. Those are my sons!

The sun filters between the blinds, warms the apartment, washes the living room in dull light. She crumbles on the couch, wipes loose tears from her cheeks, takes in a deep breath, heads towards the bathroom. She paints her lips a shiny brown, lines her eyes carefully, strokes her lashes with mascara. She finishes, pulls her hair into a neat ponytail, scrutinizes herself in the mirror. Grooved her eyes are with lines.

In the room, she pulls her best jeans from the closet; faded, frazzled around the cuff, but less frazzled and less faded than the other two pairs she owns. She slides on a white shirt, tucking the stains out of sight, then puts on her black sandals. In the bedroom's full-length mirror, a second look over; a meticulous full body inspection, so thorough, it seems more of an examination. The verdict: she looks good, as good as she could look at present.

She walks toward the apartment gates; summer sun sizzles her back. She waits at bus stop her hands neatly over her lap alone. What will they say to her? What will she say to them? And how do they look? A few minutes pass; the bus arrives. She walks to the back where two boys sit aged close to Chris Jr. and Adrian. Rhonda smiles. They frown.

She sits quietly staring out the window watching the city landscape fade into the background. The smell of gas, exhaust drift through open windows. Three hours have passed since her argument with Chris, plenty of time to get the boys out of the house if he chose.

Near eight the stubborn sunlight is yielding. Rhonda walks slow, deliberate as if applying careful consideration to each step. A block away she sees the house. The lawn a healthy green, meticulously trimmed, edged. A late model Taurus is parked in the driveway.

A group of kids their faces unfamiliar play basketball on a curbside hoop. They struggle in the feeble sunlight. Wary, Rhonda approaches the house, up the paved driveway that leads to the oak door.

A picture window opens into a spacious living room. Rhonda rings the doorbell, considers if she has time to run before anyone answered, but stays, her hands slightly trembling. Chris answers. He obliterates instantly her resolve, confidence.

I figured you d come anyway, he says regarding her with confident, scolding eyes. His goatee is neatly trimmed; his short hair speckled gray. I thought I told you we could make some arrangements.

Where are my boys? She hides her hands inside her pockets.

They re not here. Chris stands in the door s threshold, his starched pants, a button down shirt. Everything about him said he has it together; she s aware despite her anger.

Where are my boys? You can t keep me from seein my boys. Her voice is calm.

The basketball s echo quiets in the distance. She feels curious eyes scrutinize. Anxiety swells.

They re not here, he repeats. He antagonizes with his smile. In the driveway a car pulls up, Chris s wife Helen and the boys. Rhonda, she turns and runs towards them; in the front yard they meet.

My babies!

A chilly reception. The boys freeze in the grass rigid as metal. Adrian stands in front of Chris Jr.; their expressions are blank. Leery, she stops just short of an embrace

Let mama look at her babies.

Baggy jeans, NFL jerseys, and sparkling white tennis shoes they wear.

How you guys doing?

Their faces, framed in neatly trimmed haircuts, are disappointing. Adrian stands back peeks around his brother.

What s wrong baby? She takes one knee levels her face with Adrian s.

Ain t you happy to see your mama?

Excruciating silence follows. Rhonda wishes she could recapture the words.

Adrian avoids her eyes, looks just behind her where Chris stands.

What s the matter?

He has the awful expression of a child who has endured too many disappointments.

Daddy says you use drugs. The words explode.

She looks up at Adrian, eyes pleading for consolation there s none. A part of her wants to explain, deny the accusation, another part realizes the futility of that. When she stands, a circle of mud stains her knee. She looks at Chris Helen the boys *his* boys; she retreats, speechless, towards the sidewalk.

Beneath the black cloudless sky she s spent hours wandering past landmarks of a life she no longer knew: her high school, childhood home, church. The journey s destination: the filthy apartments, a place she can escape reality. She approaches the

building the way a condemned man walks to his execution, a sobering sense of finality, of resignation.

Rhonda hurries past a huddle of men, through a fence, along a winding path. Near the door a teenage boy stands guard, dressed in Dickie slacks, knee length white t-shirt, blue baseball cap turned backwards.

What you need? he asks.

Bear here? She half hopes he ll respond no.

Maybe what you need?

Bear.

Who you? His mouth twist in a condescending half-turn.

Rhonda.

Wait. He slams abruptly the door behind him.

Her eye twitches, a signal of regret. She considers leaving, the problem: she can t find reasons to leave only reasons to stay. Her pulse throbs in her neck, her wrist. He reappears, the teenage guard, at the door and steps aside without a word. Dark inside the apartment, the front room is vacant, at the end of the hall the flicker of a TV. Rhonda walks down the narrow corridor towards the light, the scent of weeds hangs heavy as fabric. Bear is stuffed at table his stomach pushed out.

Back huh? The TV glints in his eyes.

In the faint shadows of the room Bear looms even more repulsive, larger than when she had last seen him, of that she s sure. He smells of a man who hasn t washed in days.

What s crackin ? He reaches a hand in his pants for his plastic baggie lined with tiny pieces of crack. Frazzled braids, his hair separated by a lone centered part a gash. He s squeezed in a white t-shirt camouflaged with stains.

I need a favor. Rhonda says.

He stares, Bear, his pupils dark as coal, his whites dark as dehydrated urine.

What? You know how shit go round here. Ain t no credit.

Money she hasn t; better judgment encourages her to leave; desperation holds her still, an aching need, to numb her pain, a determination.

Bear come on let me get a sixteenth or somethin on credit? I ll get you the money back in a day or so I swear it. I m workin .

He looks across at her eyes narrowed. She shivers.

Ain t nothin happenin . If I give you credit I might as well give credit to every muthafucka who come up in here with a sad story. I d be chasin every cluck in the city round for my bread. He deposits the bag in his pants. I ain t no bank, he adds.

Come on Bear I ain t...

Come on Bear my ass, if you ain t got no bread, keep it movin . He turns his back against her. Rhonda walks towards the door; his head down shoulders slumped, sandals trailing across the filthy carpet. An extended defeat, her day, and now at the end of it, she can t get high.

Rhonda, Bear calls as she grabs the doorknob. We ain t got no credit but we do got a helluva payment plan.

Her motions are staggered, neck first then body; she turns to him, her mouth parted. Breath stops abrupt.

Hours later she is not sure how she survived his touch, a nasty grope that traced almost every inch of her body, cannot fathom how she endured his foul smell, one that unsettled her stomach. She felt dead trapped beneath him, smothered in his flesh while he labored above her. His grunts shattered her eyes, nasty breath against her neck. His penetration felt like a knife, left untenable wounds. When he forced his way in her mouth she clenched her eyes and hoped when they opened, she would be dead. She is dead, her spirit.

She clutches in her hand three pills, payment for the remainder of her dignity. Opposite hand, she clenches a pipe. Along littered alleyways, back streets she trudges what feel like endless miles. In a few minutes she will reach the bridge, moments afterwards the pain will cease.

A dog bark echoes in the darkness as she passed a house. Rhonda barely flinches. She is busy planning. She won't leave a note.

Breezy, the night's air; the streets lonely, still, but the loneliness felt appropriate. She walks down a hill into a grassy schoolyard, through a hospital parking lot. The sign illuminates in giant red lights reads like a message: emergency.

The bridge looms in the distance, lights glint off the river. The air is thick, suffocating. She watches a few cars cross the bridge into downtown, pauses a few feet away. A moment of incomplete silence is interrupted by the music of the

current. Rhonda walks onto the bridge's walkway, looks down at the water. The shore turns away gentle currents. The immediacy of it all she knows she must take action before courage is squandered.

She leans against the steel guardrail, studies the murky river. She fumbles over questions that will never be answered. Will the boys miss her? How will Champ take it? Unsteady her legs; she opens her hands, inspects the pills, the pipe. She lays one on screen, searches for her lighter.

A flicker.

Clouds linger in her mouth.

Numbed, she throws the pipe, the last of the crack in the river. She straddles the guardrail. Motionless water looked like a blanket below; she reasons the impact will be painless.

She swings her other leg over the rail she sits atop it. A moment of suspended time, the cool blood fumes through her veins, muscles tense; a haze filters his vision. She swallows, clenches her eyes fist tight. Jump. Her body won't respond. A second deep breath she takes stars down, again at the river, listens for traffic car. None approaches. There will be no rescue. She shudders, counts to three, swells her chest with captured breaths--exhales. Jump. She won't she's paralyzed, doesn't have the courage. She climbs over the rail, collapses. Tears trickle the concrete.

Twenty-three

Calmness. The moonlight steals between the blinds, slicing the room in thin shadows, like pinstripes. The window open, the wind whispering through the opening, the rain sliding past, striking the pavement in rhythm, each drop part of the symphony, sliding down the glass tiny rivulets. The disc player, the low hum of music, Champ in the bed, head sinking into the pillow eyes, beholding Kymm a statue, a figure molded for perfection.

She is undressing, a private strip tease, slinking before him. She bends at the waist saluting him to remove a boot.

Next, a thin jacket discarded a few feet away. A profile of splendid breasts standing firm against the cotton, a hardened nipple the size of a fingertip. She removes it arms up hoisting it over head, hair falling loose and untamed on her shoulders. Her skin has a shine; it s as if she s been polished.

The split in her ankle length skirt rises ankle to kneecap, surrounds her physique like expensive but tasteful packaging. She loosens one button, a second. She doesn t step out of he skirt, she wriggles, the jean gripping her hips then falling.

He is memorizing her now, the curves of her body, the glow of her skin. Her movements, as if somehow without this effort these moments won t endure. He is forming pictures. Bare legs, long and thin, bowed, smooth as silk. The narrow line of black silk panties disappears between her buttocks.

He is consumed by her.

She is aware.

He steps from the bed, walks behind her and clasps her with his arms. His hands are on her breast, nipples hard as iron.

She can feel him now, stiff in the small of her back.

He slides her shirt overhead, arms up, she slinks, her scent sweet beneath his nose. In the mirror their darkened silhouettes, shadows.

She s sublime her figure in the frail moonlight.. He places gentle kisses on her neck, lips making a soft sucking sound.

Her head tips; she is accepting him, her hands on top of his.

In the bed he removes his boxers, lying on his back. His penis is the standing straight, saluting her, a drip of cum on its tip.

She straddles him, takes his livid penis in her deft hands, strokes. He s watches, revels in the moment, feeling her mouth — hot as an over — her tongue gliding across his head. She backs away from him, her head falling in his groin. Her mouth is on him; he acknowledges this with a loud moan. Her speed is even, her strokes from base to tip. Their eyes meet, and for a moment, split second, if posed questioned they d refuse to believe there were any other people in the entire world. She removes her mouth, a dab of cum like string hanging from her lip. She strokes him, his penis gleaming like dolphin s skin.

They are under the sheets, the comforter discarded, strew across the bedrail. A chill is leaking in, the smell of rain.

She straddles him, slides her panties to the side, and lowers.

He is filling her, his penis throbbing. She surrounds him like fruit peels. A long pause, they're watching each other, their eyes fixed, her hands pressing his stomach overlapping one another; she uses them to measure and guide. They start in unison, the beginning of a concert. Their moans are crossed; she lowers and raises, he assists with a slight thrust. They know exactly how to respond, where to touch.

Her hair has fallen over her face wisps of bangs partially cover her eyes.

Promise me you won't ever leave me, she says.

He is quiet; he considers it for a moment, not the comment but its origin. The words are like premonition; he cannot stand them.

Never. The word falls from his lips, empty; it lacks authenticity; the truth is he can't promise.

Never what? she asks. Her mouth is agape, eyes clenched.

I'll never leave you,

Us,

A reminder. He looks down at her stomach, the tiny bulge above her pelvis.

Never, is all he can manage. He is alarmed by his lack of stability, by the imminence of change. It terrorizes; their terror leaks in his speech.

She is quiet now, riding, sweat glistening between her breast, the sound sloshing between her legs. She's coaxing him with controlled tension. He erupts. The wetness trickling down the sides of her thighs. Her climax is not far behind.

Afterwards they lie in momentary silence, the smell of sex carried by the breeze, the sound of passing cars, tires revving against the slick pavement. They lie

on pillows, face up, Champ's arm behind Kymm's head. Her hand grips the inside of his thigh. They lie like spent athletes, vegetables, they can't move by will or force.

Why'd you say that? he asks.

She's silent, her breath a whisper, legs tremble.

After a moment she says, Because I've been having these dreams. No I've been having these nightmares Champ, and me and this baby are alone! You know what happens? You and Bump are ridin' in that damn car doin' whatever the hell y'all do, and all of a sudden police everywhere, ain't nowhere for neither one of y'all to run. Then they open the trunk —

I won't let it happen. I promise you,

How can you stop it? Promise me what? You can promise me shit unless you're ready to quit now. Not tomorrow, not next week, not June! You ready to give this stuff up now? Her voice strains. She moves his arm from behind her head, turns on her side away from him.

Soon as I gradu —

She interrupts, Graduate. You think tomorrow is gonna change everything. This ain't about graduation. Don't even fix your mouth to say that shit no more. It's about money. Nothing else. It's not about me and it damn sure ain't about *our* child. Tears are in her eyes; they won't fall.

Champ is silent, partially because he doesn't know what to say, partially because anything he can say won't matter. He's transparent, clear as the sandwich

bags he uses for packaging his dope, and she sees right through him, to the truth.

Kymm sees truth in Champ he doesn't know he possesses. She has a power over him, greater than anyone or thing, and the strength comes from knowing what he will and will not do; she's aware of his capabilities, weaknesses, faults.

I'm going to be here for him and for you. The words fell off his tongue like lines he'd rehearsed. She didn't answer. She was quiet; he couldn't tell when she fell asleep.

He lies awake staring at the ceiling.

The first ring he's not sure isn't imagined. The second stirs his light sleep, the sleep that precedes dreams. Champ sits up, takes a deep sigh, rubs a fist to his eye. A knock, faint like the sound of mice feet scattering across a floor. Champ finds his boxers and walks to the front door. He squints peering through the peephole — nothing; he sees clear across the hallway. Another knock

Who there?

Mama, The first thing he notices is her voice — harsh. He cracks the door; she's standing just to the side of it, outside the view of the peephole.

She's wearing an oversized t-shirt drenched in rain, jeans, and black highheels, with her left heel missing. Beneath her eyes, black rings, on her left cheek a fresh gash.

What the fuck is this shit about? He asks, although he knows the answer.

He opens the door wide; a man stands behind his mother, the remnants of a man. He s a wet towel that hasn t been wrung; the rain dripping the floor. His tennis shoes are opening at the mouth exposing his toes.

You bringin this shit to my house now ma? Where I lay my head? He says.

Baby your mama need a hundred dollars, I gotta pay a bill. Her voice is on the verge of desperation.

She smells of rain and old clothes, her companion of rain and shit. He s thin as grass blades, not a man, but the remnants of one. Their combination is enough to unsettle Champ s stomach.

You come to my front door at four in the morning for some money to pay a bill?

He s seeing her, for the first time, through a completely different lens: he s disgusted. She keeps gesturing with her hands, hands with the wrinkles of the elderly — green veins like small pipes — the scars of construction worker, her false nail eroded, as if they were dipped in battery acid.

Is it four? She asks her partner looking at her wrist where a watch might have been. She s truly and addict; she s lost partial ability to differentiate fact from fiction, to judge her own ludicracy. Come on Champ I need it all right. I owe somebody. Is that you wanna hear? I owe to somebody. Give it to your mama. I need it. You know I wouldn t come to you if I didn t need it.

She. she she s tellin , tellin the truth bro, her partner says. His voice stammers. He has the mouth of an old boxer who fought with his guards down; he has more gaps than teeth, and the teeth he has are the color of over-ripe bananas.

His interruption angers Champ. Shut the fuck up nigga for break yo thin ass up

Champ stares Rhonda down, watches her eyes. If they could speak they d plead for much more than a hundred dollars; in vain, a hundred million couldn t save her.

I ain t got no hundred dollars, and if I did, you the last person on this mutha fuckin earth I d give it to. You bring this ole scatter tooth nigga to my home, you come to my crib at the muthafuckin crack a dawn. Rhonda get the fuck away from my door; I don t give a damn if I never see yo cracked out ass again!

It takes all his strength to close the door without a slam. He walks to the bedroom and slides into bed. Kymm is awake.

Who s that this early in the morning? She asks.

Mama. She fuckin up. Again. Got some fool wit her too.

Champ sinks his head in the pillow.

What d she want? Kymm asks. They re ignoring their tension, like gangs calling a truce.

What do she ever want? Say she needs a hundred bucks to pay a bill. It s four o clock in the muthafuckin morning.

Soft knocks outside echo from the front door. Kymm and Champ ignore.

I thought she was doing good, she says.

She had me fooled this time too, but I ain t givin her a dime, I don t care who she owe,

Louder knocks, whispers. Champ sits up places his hands on his head, shakes it. I can t believe this shit, he says.

He s remembering times when Rhonda would give him the rent money, only to return in the early morning to retrieve. He remembers the battles he d lost as a child trying to hide the money, her anger. The time she got so angry she pulled him out of bed by his ankles, to grab the foodstamps and money under his mattress.

He walks toward the door. Rhonda is outside calling his name. I m not leavin til I get the money, she says. Her voice is emptied of pleading.

I ain t givin you shit, get the fuck away from my door,

Rhonda bangs on the door, kicks it twice; it s the sound of police kicking in a door.

You dirty muthafucka, you gonna let somebody put they hands on your mama cause you won t give her a funky ass hundred dollars. What kind of son

Rhonda get away from door. Call me whatever you want. I m not givin you no smoke money. You best be gettin out of my building for these white folks call the police on you, Champ says. His voice is calm , a calmness he knows infuriates his mother. Calling her by her first name isn t providing the distance he needs.

Champ looks out the peephole. Rhonda takes off her heel, and kicks the door with the heel of her foot. He s amazed at her strength her ability to bear pain. Co-co-co-come on Rhon-Rhonda let s go, her partner says. He tugs at her sleeve; she yanks free.

Get yo hands off me you punk muthafucka, if you was any kind of man you d a tried to help. You got us in this mutha fuckin jam in the first place. Her voice; she s another person now, a woman without dignity, morals; venom slips from her tongue. Her partner backs away.

Rhonda kicks hard at the door, Go ahead and let em call the police, and when they get here I ma tell em my son sells crack to everybody in the city, but won t give his mama a few dollars to get high! She s a manic now; her fist are bloodied, her heels. He s afraid to test her bluff

Champ s neighbor across the hallway cracks the door, in the opening eyes and a shower cap.

What the fuck you starin at? Rhonda asks, Mind yo muthafuckin business! She stares the neighbor down; the door slams close. The interruption does nothing to squelch her anger; she kicks at the door, chips holes in the wood with the heel of her pump.

Give me my muthafuckin money! She screams, she s like a woman over forty, childless, whose only goal is pregnancy, she s determined.

Champ s weighing her determination, his options. He knows submission causes repetition, but he can t afford to be strong now. He walks to the kitchen

cabinet, pulls down a brown paper bag filled with stacks of small bills. He removes a stack of one hundred ones.

I give you this money don t you every in life come back to my house again.

The moment the words are released from his lips, he knows they re in vain. He s feeding a monster asking it not to return.

She stops kicking, she s frozen, as if she s actress called to cut. Champ cracks his door, tosses the money at his mother, shakes his head.

Stay the fuck away from me. Don t step foot in that arena tomorrow

She doesn t respond; she starts off down the hall, she s limping badly, her foot is broken.

Twenty-four

The thirteenth of June. a balmy day, cloudless sky, the wind hushed. He drives to the arena. The music plays, sun beams through the sunroof, the wind whistles overhead. Champ pulls into the parking lot of the auditorium. Parking is scarce; he drives for minutes before finding a space several feet from the building. He removes his cap and gown from the back seat. He puts on the hat, the tassels hanging from the button; he walks with the gown in arm. Congratulations, he hears. He cannot identify the speaker. He smiles a smile of contentment, a smile of relief, pride.

Inside the auditorium graduates dressed in caps and gowns mingle. Faculty wander through sections greeting, signing list, checking names. Large signs posted on the walls: Liberal Arts, School of Business, Engineering, etc.; he stands beneath the communications sign. There are students he vaguely remembers from classes, instructors he s had brief conversations with. A nervous twitch in his stomach. He pretends to be preoccupied.

Hi Champ.

It s a familiar voice.

Are you nervous? She asks.

Little bit, I ll calm down when I get that piece of paper.

She walks away, abruptly. Champ brushes wrinkles from his gown, glances at the polish of his black Gucci shoes, squared at the toe. The silver shoe buckle

glints under the auditorium lights. His slacks, summer wool, a deep blue, half-inch cuff, fall over the shoe.

They park outside in unmarked vehicles, a Suburban, Tahoe, Taurus. Dressed in plain clothes, identified furtively by the badges, radios, cluttered on their waistlines, their guns. They burst through eight of them the apartment s entrance, up the emergency staircase feet pounding the steps like a stampede of horses. The sprint down the empty hall, reach the door.

FBI, they scream, We have a warrant to search your premises.

Silence behind the door. They ram.

FBI, they scream a second time.

The second blow barrels the door.

They storm in, lead by Haskins, secure every room. He directs.

They begin in the kitchen, cups, plates, saucers, flung to the counter, cracking, shattering. The cackle of walkie-talkie radios, the static. They wear orange nylon jackets, black wing tips shoes; they enter the apartment like a small stampede, their feet bustling behind one another. Officer — heads first for the kitchen. He begins removing plates. A static voice sounds over his walkie-talkie, alerts him they are in position.

In the large room, students file into lines by schools and alphabetical last names, Engineering, Communications, Geology etc. Adams, Davis, Jackson.

Champ files in with line with the rest of his peers. In front of him, leaning forward slightly, is a white girl, her ankles exposed under her gown, blonde hair flowing from under her cap; she wears the distinctive honors tassels around her neck sandals with straps; her feet are pale ice; she reeks of fruity scents.

Prideful, haughty the graduates relived. Champ glances around the room; the few faces of color are sparse. He shakes the hand of a white professor, his slim clean-shaven faced framed in black glasses. The first faint lines of age creep from his eye. His hand is veined is firm.

Excited? The professor asks.

Relieved, Champ says.

Got your post grad plans in order yet

Nah, not yet.

Champ's fear surfaces in his voice, the reality he doesn't have a set plan.

The short exchange could take place with anyone, between any two people in the room. Ahead a faculty member, megaphone in hand, shouts directions. The line proceeds out of the assembly room. Champ follows, gaze haphazardly falling to the bare ankles of the girl in front of him.

It is long concrete hallway, dark like a tunnel and cool, that leads to the main floor. At the hallway's end, the clamor of applause. Sweat speeds down his sides; Champ emerges from the hall. The clatter of heels and hard-soled shoes echo his ears.

In the bedroom the officers begin with the closet, tear expensive garments, seams ripping, throw them across the bed. They ravage pockets, remove loose bills, coins, crumpled papers; they carelessly throw these contents into a pile. There are several shoeboxes located above, on the shelf, below, on the floor. They open the box lids number in the dozens dump the shoes in a pile, bang them Gucci, Prada, Ferragamo, Mezlan against walls.

Anything? A voice yells from the kitchen.

Nothing. Nothing but a bunch of Designer shit back here this guy makes a lot of money.

They continue. They fling dresser drawers to the floor, spill garments. They rummage through its contents: underwear, panties, socks, t-shirts pens, papers, clips, a hand held scale.

Scale! someone shouts.

What you got? Let me see? an officer asks, breath short like he's run a marathon.

Scale.

Harrison enters the kitchen, That's nothing. Keep looking. There's dope in here guys we gotta find it.

In the bedroom they rummage pairs of socks, unfold them, push their arms through them like sleeves.

They clap, whistle, scream, the audience a deafening clamor; camera flashes sting Champ's eyes. In the midst of brief pauses, graduates strike smiling poses then fill rows of empty chairs. On stage a slender mahogany podium, the university's president stands in front of it; the spotlights cast a glare against his oily forehead. Deans wear gowns, caps, tassels, stand behind the president. Across the stage sits the mayor, a congressman. The president waits for the demise of applause before speaking.

I want to thank all of you for coming to celebrate this special day with us, he says in heavy African accent, the people you see seated here in front of me are ending a long journey each is deserving of praise.

The president his gray beard resembles matted carpet wears thick glasses. He pauses. He clears his throat, sips from a cup of water. Education is a lifetime endeavor, and our graduates today prove just that. From our eldest graduate whom at 71, receives her Bachelors in psychology, some fifty-three years after she enrolling in her first college class, to our youngest graduate Ming Li, who receives today, her Bachelors Of Science in engineering just four days after her sixteenth birthday. His head is barely visible above the podium.

A team of officers four enters the auditorium in suits, flash badges at attendants who stand behind the turnstiles. Inconspicuous, they can't be identified by glance, but rather the belts hidden beneath their jackets: handcuffs, keys, guns, the whisper of lowered radios. They descend auditorium, steps toward the stage, find seats near-by.

We're in position, one officer whispers over his phone. He's seated next to the officer returns the radio to his belt, expressionless face forward.

Champ searches the audience for family, friends. The president urges seated the crowd, between crowds seating and the mayor's rising a moment of absolute silence.

Champ! A familiar voice yells. Champ turns his head, Champ! Interrupted silence. Champ spots an uncle in the crowd, near-by Kymm, Eliza, Bubba, his brother's, conspicuously absent: Rhonda. He smiles, waves a hand; his heart sinks.

Heat leaks in the apartment from open windows. Officers sweat, they're drained from the disappointment. Thoroughly, they've searched the bedroom, clothes strewn in frustration, blankets ripped from mattress, carpet torn at seams, walls banged for hollowness they uncover nothing.

Keep an eye on him, an officer says, as soon as we get the evidence we need we'll move on.

In the kitchen pans clang tile countertops, cupboards emptied of food, boxes dumped, shaken, silverware spread across counters. They drain the milk, pop, juices, in the sink. They wear plastic gloves, face masks, throw pots, pans, plastic containers, to the floor. Shouts of frustration.

Harrison radios, Don't lose him.

Got em. They re taking their seats now. Just give us the word and we ll grab him. Anything yet?

Incomplete, Champ s happiness, he half smiles; he thinks of Rhonda, Bump. The mayor s speech slips in and out of his conscience. He watches the students seated near him, exuberant, enamored they appear by the speech. Promises the speakers make bright futures, healthy job markets, health insurance; Champ considers these seriously for the first time. He checks the time, diamonds in his watch sparkle beneath the lights. He looks in the stands again for his family; Rhonda s seat remains empty.

He imagines what she is doing, where, with whom. He imagines amid the fog, pipe crackle, burnt lips, she faintly remembers his day. He s certain she remembers, although it would be easier to understand if she didn t. His resolve accumulates like summer snowfall in the mountains. He looks down at his feet, at the feet of others seated in his row, battered wingtips, cheap leather sandals, scuffed sneakers, the marks of struggling students. He s disgusted, suddenly, by his luxuries.

Ahead students file out of the aisles toward the podium. Impatient Champ waits his turn, clutches the slim, slick, hope Rhonda will appear.

There are only a few places left: the hallway closet, the bathroom; two officers enter it, opening the medicine cabinet; they empty the contents of pill bottles

on the counter. They pull the curtain back, in the shower; they search under the sink, find cleaning products, rags, things not worth noting.

A second closet, leather coats, minks, down jackets, thrown to the floor, pockets ransacked. Found: loose papers, ticket stubs, crumpled bills, twenties, hundreds. On a top shelf shoeboxes stacked on the floor.

Harrison searches through them like a man with only one goal, like a maniac. He slides his hands in shoes, leather, suede, animal skinned, hurls them across the room screams.

The box is not particularly heavy, the weight of a thick soled boot perhaps. Inside tissue paper, inside the paper a kilo mummified in layers of plastic, electrical tape. He peels the first layer of clear plastic, beneath, a thin layer of mustard, beneath the mustard, more tape.

Jackpot guys. His voice echoes through the apartment. He is kneeling on one knee when they enter the room, huddle.

Knife, he orders.

Champ follows the procession to the podium, listens to names called over the speakers, watches the students walk, shake hands, exit. The flickers of cameras are like tiny explosions in the audience. His heart pounds, stops, begins again abruptly, or so it seems; it is anything but steady, hands tremble, the twitch of an eye. He watches the girl just ahead of him, her hair lying across her gown, bare ankles. She is a diversion.

A knife. Harrison takes it, begins cutting through layers of packaging. He peels them back with the care of a surgeon. Silence interrupted only the static of radios, for a moment, there seems not a single breath among them. Through the last layer, he slices. He tears the layers away, throws them across the room. Its chalk white, small flakes crumble and fall aside, he sniffs. The smell stings his nose, water his eyes. Ahhh yes, he screams. We got him we got his ass.

Ten feet. Teen feet lie between Champ the stage, diploma, change. He s calm, relieved, measuring his steps, watches the president his croquet smiles growing more force and ascends the stage carefully. He wipes his sweating palm on his gown, glancing over his shoulder back towards where his family sits; the distance blurs them.

Word comes across the radio. Officers empty into aisles, surround the stage s exit. Champ takes the stage, shakes the president s hand a firm grip they both force smiles. He sees the officers at the stage end, it s a premonition, one officer, hand cuffs in hand, expression grim.

Epilogue

There are moments in his life he idolizes, moments he despises. He's learned to live he's perfected it in prison with regrets. He must. Many nights he's overwhelmed. In three years changes; he's gained pounds of muscle; his waist, ankles, wrists, still thin. He wears shoulder length braids; the braids fall to his shoulder now; he has facial hair. His speech has changed; he's learned the how to communicate within the walls; it's all he has to get through. He's surviving.

The space he occupies, his home, is the size of a small bathroom, made of concrete and iron. Everything he owns within arms reach; everything he loves beyond it. A mirror, toilet, bunk, thin mattress wires stab his back when he sleeps are his amenities. Pictures of Lyric he's never met her hang croquet on his wall, pictures of Rhonda, Chris, Adrian, Eliza, Bubba. He removed Kymm's picture the first year; it took six months for her to desert.

He's surrounded by the cruel sounds of prison: thick-soled boots of the guards against the concrete, the clang of iron, screech of inmates. At night he lies awake with these sounds; they pierce his ears.

He's whittled his life to a single routine, each week exactly like the last. Days move forward; he lives in repetition. Breakfast, morning yard, lunch, noon yard, dinner, evening yard, lights out. He's learned to live in solitude, realizes it has benefits beyond the surface, benefits which if he's patient he can't be impatient will strengthen. In this solitude which is clasped around him like cuffs,

he writes. Poems, stories, letters to family, friends. He has a full visiting list: no visitors. Weekends are most difficult.

A luminous August day, azure sky, the light creeps through an opening cut in the concrete, a window the size of a shoebox. The bars slice the shadows, the dust. Champ sits on his bunk; his shirt is off; he writes. He's penning Rhonda a letter he's sent several with no reply to Eliza's address because it's the only address she has. He prays for her his mother's safety.

Champ's armpits, his forehead is damp with sweat. He ignores the names called over the speaker inmates with visitors it's an art form he's mastered. The sounds of guards in the hallway, keys, iron cell doors slam open, shut. He doesn't notice the guard at his cell; he doesn't look up.

Open twenty-three, the guard says then, Jackson get your clothes on you got a visit.

Champ looks up, his eyes are empty; he's suspicious it's a joke.

What you declinin ?

He lays his notebook and pen on his mattress, puts on his shirt, brushes his teeth. He switches from prison boots to Nike's sent from Eliza. He walks down the hall flanked by inmates who cling to cell bars.

Got a visit today?

Yeah, Champ says. He's hardly able to contain his smile. With moist palm he tucks his shirt, pats his braids. The guard searches, arms extended, outside the visitors room. Champ enters the room, searches for familiar faces. Across the

room, she smiles, she holds Lyric. They wave. Champ approaches them, nervousness tugging at his stomach.

Hi mama. He hugs them both.

Hi daddy, Hi Champ Champ smiles and they sit.

I ve been clean since you been gone, Rhonda says.

Daddy I love you. When you come home?